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RANCH

MINNA CAROLINE SMITH

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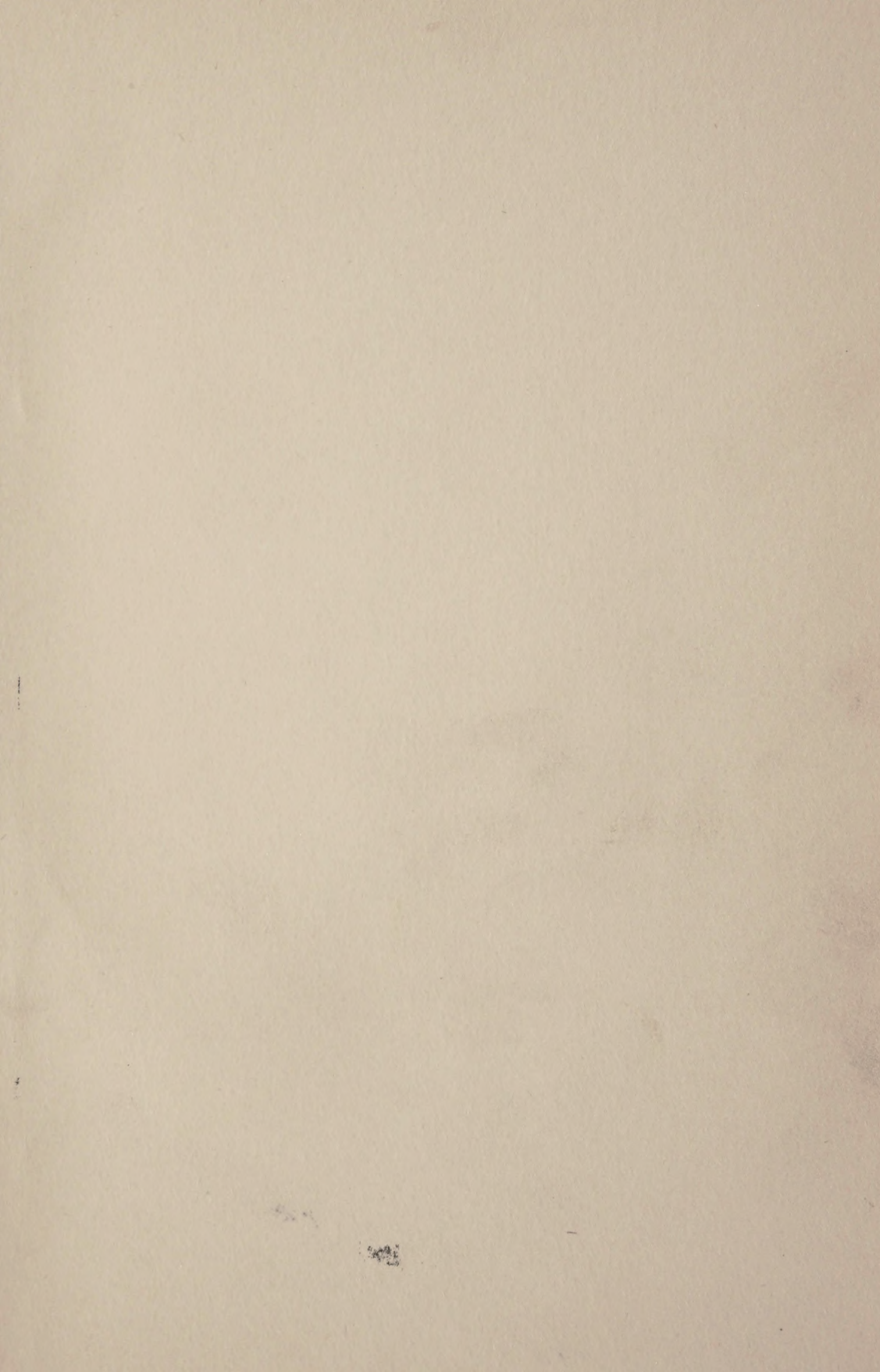
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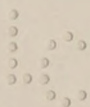
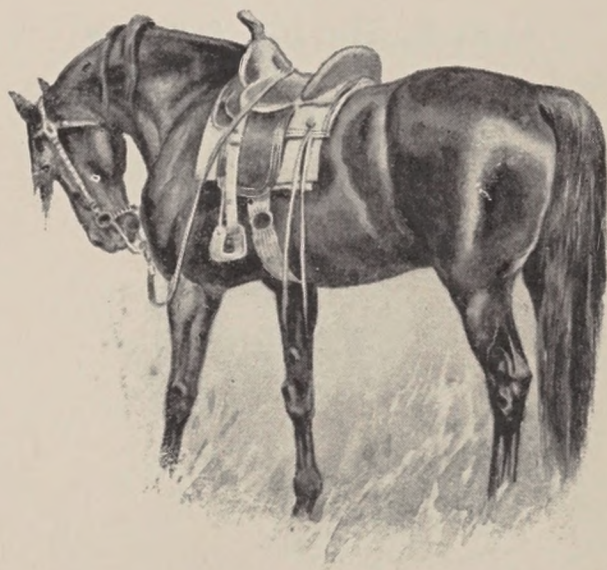
Full speed to the open country

RED TOP RANCH

A STORY OF RANCH LIFE
IN WYOMING

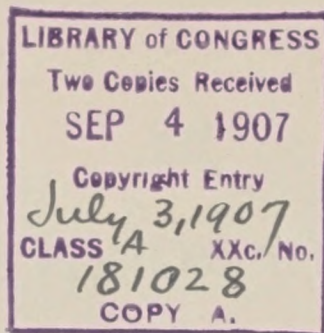
BY

MINNA CAROLINE SMITH



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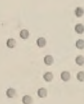


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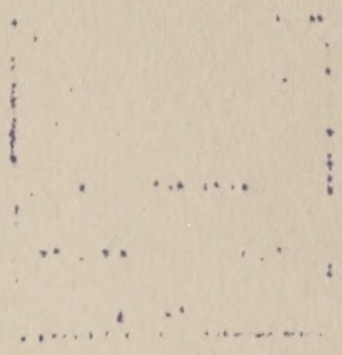
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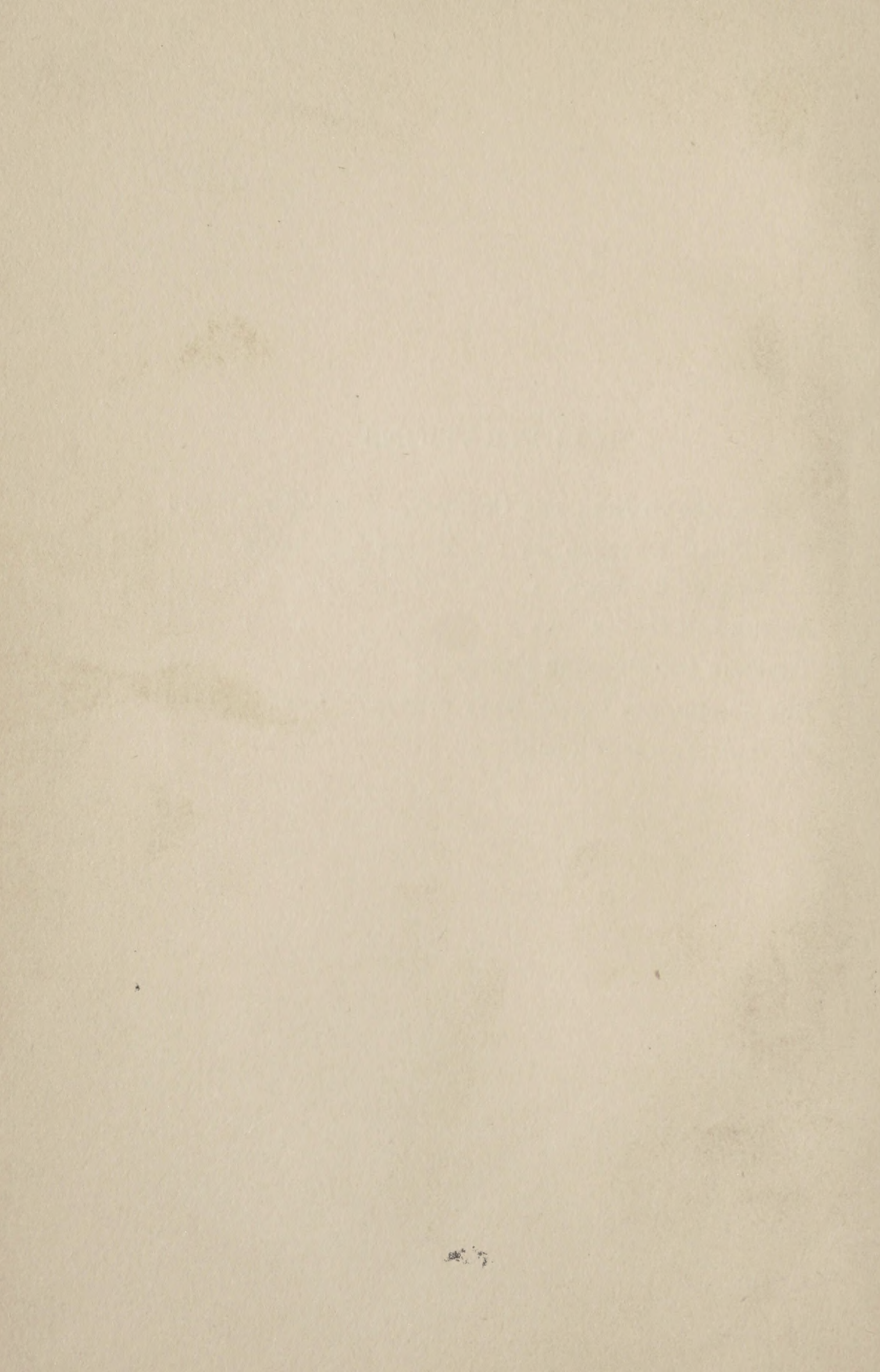
TO MARION SCHROEDER

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RED TOP RANCH.

CHAPTER I

LEAVING HOME

MARY LLOYD lived with her mother, father, and sister Edith in a pleasant house fronting the water of Long Island Sound. Mary was a girl of eleven, a romping, healthy, out-door girl, good at her lessons, but always glad when they were over. She was usually a little sunburned; her fluffy light hair was often out of order; her hair-ribbons would get lost, but her blue eyes and pretty mouth did not lose their smiling look for such small troubles as that.

She came rushing like a whirlwind up on the piazza where her mother and sister Edith were sitting one June afternoon. School closed the morning before and Mary was revelling in freedom. The postman had just come up the driveway; she had run down the steps to get the letters, and now was fairly dancing with joy.

"Mother! mother!" she cried, waving an envelope over her head. "Here is a letter from Wyoming, from Uncle Billy!"

"Let me have it." Mrs. Lloyd held out her hand.

"No, no! It's addressed to me."

Mary and her uncle were very special friends, and had been since his visit East the year before.

"Very well, read it yourself," said her mother.

Mary tore open the envelope, and glancing down the page she cried:

"Oh, oh, Uncle Billy wants me to come out to the ranch and he will meet me in Chicago!" She began dancing up and down again.

"A big trip for a little girl," said her father, coming unseen up the walk behind her.

Mary turned at the sound of his voice, ran to him and clasped his arm.

"Say I may go, daddy!" she coaxed him, "Please say I may go to Wyoming!"

"There, don't pull daddy's arm off!" he answered smiling. "Sit down here on the steps and read us your letter."

Mary eagerly read aloud:

"RED TOP RANCH, WYOMING,

"June 14, 1906.

"MY DEAR NIECE MARY:

"I want you to come out here to the ranch and

stay with us till fall at least. Your aunt is alone too much since we lost our baby last spring. She needs you. Don't speak of this to her, but come and make a business of cheering her up. She says to tell you that you shall ride on her thoroughbred mare Fireball. Your cousins Fred and Bert and Charlie will all be glad to see you. Charlie says to tell that little pink tender-foot she shall have her pick of our bronchoes, and ride horseback every day.

"Tell your mother and father that I am going to Chicago next week on business, and I shall be there by the time you get this letter, say June eighteenth. If you leave New York on the morning of June twentieth, I will meet you in your station at Chicago on the twenty-first. Then, darling, you and I will go to Wyoming together. Tell your father I hope he will telegraph me at the Palmer House, Chicago, when you get this letter. Then I will telegraph you so that just before your train arrives in Chicago you will get it, telling you that I am at the station all right waiting for you.

"Love to all.

"Your Uncle Billy,

"WILLIAM J. MERWIN."

"Father, may I go? May I go?" Mary's arms went around her father's neck.

"Don't hug daddy's head off," her mother cried as, laughing, he loosened her arms.

"How could you go to Chicago all alone?" he asked.

"Of course she could n't go!" said her mother. "I would n't think of such a thing."

"Why not?" said Mr. Lloyd. "I know some of those conductors on that fast train to Chicago. Mary would be all right. There are no changes to make."

"I don't see why Mary has to go everywhere. Nobody asks me to go to any ranches," said Edith.

"Quietly, now!" said her father. "Mary is the one who is invited. When you are older, perhaps you can go too."

"Mary has n't proper clothes to wear on a ranch. She can't go off at a day's notice like that," objected Mrs. Lloyd.

"She won't need fancy clothes out on the ranch," said Mr. Lloyd. "Come in here a minute, mother, I want to talk to you."

Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd went into the house.

Mary stood fairly cooing with hope and delight, while Edith, teasing, said:

"You would break your neck if you got on a broncho!"

"I am not afraid of a broncho! I rode horseback with Uncle Billy when he was here."

"Well, the Indians will catch you."

"All the Indians are good Indians nowadays. Uncle Billy says so."

When her father and mother came out on the piazza again, Mary read on their faces that they had decided she was to visit the family in Wyoming, and she flew into her mother's arms and hugged her for consenting.

Two mornings later Mary went into the Grand Central Station with her father and mother and Edith.

She was dressed in a brown linen dress with red tie, belt, and hair-ribbons, and a sailor-hat. She felt strange at the thought of starting to travel a thousand miles all alone. But she kept on smiling whenever her father looked at her, while they went hand in hand through the throng of people to buy her ticket, and crossed the great waiting-room to the baggage-room to check her trunk. When Mary came back again to her mother and Edith, she sat down between them and slipped her hand into her mother's, and sat very silent till the train for Chicago was called by the man with the megaphone. Then she bravely kissed her mother and Edith good-bye, held up her chin and walked along to the train with her father, as if going off by herself was an every-day affair. When they got through the gates and into the train, they found ten or twelve

people in the sleeping-car, but there was no other little girl. On reaching Mary's section in the Pullman, Mr. Lloyd spoke to the conductor and gave him her long ticket.

"Be sure to put this young lady off at the right station," he said. "Don't let her get carried past Chicago."

"I'll take good care of her," said the big man in the blue coat, and smiled at Mary.

When her father bent to kiss her good-bye she had to wink very fast to see him through the mist in her eyes, but she kissed and hugged him heartily, trying to smile as he hurried out of the car. When the train moved off, Mary pressed her face against the window pane and saw him standing on the platform lifting his hat. She kissed her hand to him, but as she lost sight of him and the train roared out into the darkness of the tunnel, the tears would come. She turned and hid her face in her arm against the back of the seat. They were out in the light again when she heard the conductor saying:

"Well, Miss Lloyd, are you going into the dining-car?" His voice was kind and Mary looked up, pleased to be called Miss Lloyd.

"No, thank you," she replied. "I have a box of luncheon, but my father said to ask you to be so kind as to take me into the dining-car to-night for my supper."

"All right, I'll come and get you," said the conductor. "There's another girl about your size in the next car. It's perfectly safe to go through the vestibule if you feel like going in there this afternoon." He walked on down the aisle.

Mary opened the candy box that her mother had filled with sandwiches and oranges. Tied on top of the box was a parcel addressed in Edith's handwriting. Mary opened it and read these words on a slip of paper: "Don't let the Indians catch you. With much love, from Edith." Folded within was the joy and pride of Edith's heart, her best lace-trimmed handkerchief.

"Edith's all right!" thought Mary as she put the dainty handkerchief back into its wrapper. "I'll keep this for best."

She leaned against the blue plush seat when she had finished her luncheon, wondering about the girl in the next car; but she felt too timid to leave her place and in a little while she fell asleep. An hour or so later, she opened her eyes. Her head was on a narrow pillow. Across the aisle, looking at her with interest sat a girl of about her own age in a pink linen dress.

Mary sat up. The girl came across and sat down in the seat beside her.

"I told the porter to get you the pillow," she said.

"Thank you," said Mary.

"I'm used to travelling," said her new acquaintance.

"Are you all alone, too?" asked Mary.

"No, my father came with me. He's in the other car. He has gone to smoke, so I came through to see if there was anybody to talk to."

"Are you going to Chicago?" asked Mary.

"Yes, we live there. My name's Elizabeth Wright. I have been to New York with my father on business. This is the fourth time."

Mary told her her name and where she was going, and of the telegram expected next day.

The children soon felt acquainted and Elizabeth proposed that they go into her Pullman as there were fewer people there, and they could play. They found her father reading his newspaper. He was now the only person in the car. Elizabeth introduced Mary to him; then the two little girls had a game of tag up and down the aisle. They romped until they were tired and out of breath; they were glad to sit down and rest until it was time for dinner. Mary felt strange but very grand sitting at one of the tables in the dining-car full of people. Her place was next the wide window opposite Elizabeth and her father, a gray-haired handsome man, whom the colored waiters called "Senator."

After dinner Mr. Wright spoke to the conduc-

tor, and asked him to change Mary's berth from the other car to their own. Bed-time came soon, and the colored porter made up Mary's bed in the same section with Elizabeth's.

"I had better get up on the top shelf," whispered Mary, when she saw the porter let down the upper berth, which unfolded from the wall of the car like the shelf of her mother's writing-desk.

"No, I'll get up there," answered Elizabeth. "I am used to travelling."

"It is like getting up on a horse—almost, and I like a horse," said Mary. She watched with interest as the porter shook out the heavy curtains and hung them up before the berths.

Elizabeth laughed and hopped up to the top berth before Mary knew what she was going to do. So Mary got in below and began to undress. In a few moments she stood up on the side of the berth, behind the curtain.

"Elizabeth," she whispered. "Where shall I put my clothes?"

"Oh, fold them up and put them in that rack at the foot of your bed. Put your hair-ribbons in the little hammock," Elizabeth whispered back. "Give me your skirt and jacket and I'll hang them up here on the high hook next to mine."

"Take my hat up too," responded Mary, handing up the things. She began to laugh when she saw their coats and skirts hanging high with the

hats above them. "They look like Blue Beard's beheaded wives," she whispered.

Elizabeth laughed so much at this speech that her father called from his section farther down the car: "Children! Children!"

So the two girls whispered good-night to each other, Mary dropped back into her place in the semi-darkness, and folded up her clothes in silence; she put on her nightgown, and when she had said her prayers crept in between the sheets and soon fell sound asleep. Nor did she awaken once until she heard the loud voice of the porter calling as he walked down the aisle:

"Breakfast is now ready in the dining-car!"

Mary climbed up on the edge of her berth and peeped into the top one, but Elizabeth was gone. Mary sat down on her blankets, fished her hair-ribbons out of the little hammock, and was wondering how she was going to dress in such a narrow place, when Elizabeth came back from the dressing-room and parted the curtains. She was washed and dressed, and had her hair-ribbons on. She carried a dark blue bath gown over her arm.

"Oh, mine is in my trunk!" exclaimed Mary, the minute she saw it. "I don't believe mamma realized they have a bath-tub on the sleeping-car!"

Elizabeth laughed. "There is n't any bath-tub. but you can wash at the wash-bowl and dress

much better if you take your clothes into the dressing-room. I'll lend you mine." She held out the sleeves, and Mary slipped into her gown. Elizabeth led the way to the little room where Mary soon got ready for breakfast and came out with a bright face and a good appetite.

After their breakfast in the dining-car everybody began getting ready to arrive in Chicago. Mary looked anxiously at the conductor and the porter whenever they passed through the car. At last the porter brought a telegram to Elizabeth's father.

"Is that for me?" she asked.

"No, my dear," said the Senator. "Are you expecting a telegram?"

"Yes, sir," said Mary.

Elizabeth told her father of the plan of Mary's uncle, and he went and made inquiries.

But the train pulled into the great Chicago station, and there was no word from Uncle Billy.

Mary trembled with excitement as she stepped out of the car with her hand-bag in her hand. She looked eagerly at every man they met as she went with Elizabeth and the Senator into the big waiting room. But she saw not one familiar face.

"Just sit here, until I get a carriage," said Elizabeth's father to her.

"We'll have to take you home with us," said Elizabeth as he walked away.

Mary rose, and went across to the telephone booths.

"Please call up the Palmer House and my uncle, Mr. Merwin, and tell him I've come," she said to the girl at the desk.

The girl at the desk pushed up her pompadour and smiled patronizingly.

"What's your name, little girl?" she asked.

"Miss Lloyd," said Mary, with dignity.

The girl telephoned, and the answer came back that Mr. Merwin had left the hotel.

"What shall I do?" said Mary to herself. "I can't go home with Elizabeth! I had better go down to the Palmer House and wait until he comes."

"Nonsense," said Elizabeth's father, when he heard this plan. "Of course you must come home with us, and I'll telephone till I find your uncle."

Mary was having hard work to keep from crying as she went with Elizabeth to the carriage. She felt almost as if she was being kidnapped. The Senator put her and Elizabeth into the carriage; he was just getting in himself when Mary gave a shrill scream of delight and fairly tumbled out to the sidewalk. For there, coming straight towards her, was a tall, broad man,—Uncle Billy! In a moment she was swung up in his arms, hugged, and kissed; then stood smiling on the sidewalk by him.

"Why did n't you send me the telegram?" asked Mary.

"I did, chick. I sent it all right. Here it is." Her uncle gave it to Mary. "That porter in the next Pullman had it. I've been through the cars, looking for you. The porter thought the telegram was for some grown-up young lady named Lloyd. He thought you were the Senator's other daughter." Mr. Merwin turned and spoke to Elizabeth's father. Then they all shook hands and said good-bye, and Mary went away with her uncle.

They spent the rest of the day in Chicago, and took the night train for Wyoming. All night and all day and all the next night they rode westward in the sleeping-car.

Mary will never forget that second day when, as they sat at breakfast in the dining-car, she first saw the high mountains with their snowy peaks lifted against the June sky.

On the other side of the train, which had climbed up the long grade from the prairie farms, the unfenced plains swept away to the horizon with scarcely a house in sight.

"It seems like a dream that I'm in Wyoming," said Mary. "I have just longed to be here ever since you were at our house."

"You are a mile up in the air too," said her uncle. "That's your altitude now."

"I don't know what altitude means, Uncle Billy," said Mary.

"You'll hear a lot about altitude out here," he replied. "It means the distance above the sea. This train is nearly a mile above the sea now and when you get to the ranch you'll be over a mile higher up in the air than you were at Long Island Sound."

"Goodness! I feel like a balloon!" said Mary.

As the train drew near the station at Laramie, they saw from the car window a lady and three boys on horseback, galloping full gait towards the station. One of the boys was leading a pony by a long rope.

"Here come your Aunt Kate and the boys," said Uncle Billy. "They had to get up early this morning to ride in twenty miles to meet us."

When the train slowed up at the station, the four riders crossed the track in front of the engine, the ponies jumping and dancing, and pulled up back of the waiting-room. The mother of the boys was slender and small.

As soon as Mary and her uncle appeared, this little lady slipped from her saddle to the ground, tossed her broncho's bridle to her eldest son, Fred, and hurried to welcome the travellers.

Bert and Charlie, the younger boys, who were still on their bronchoes, waved their hats at their father and he waved his hand to them.

"Get down there, you young rascals," he called, "and come and meet your cousin."

With one arm Mary clung close to her Aunt Kate while she shook hands with each of the boys whom she had never seen before.

"Here 's a bronk for you to ride home, Mary," said Charlie, who was about her own age. His round sunburned face wore a mischievous grin. "I led him to town for you."

"Thank you." Mary looked approvingly at the broncho which had on one of the boys' saddles. He was a bay cow-pony, with a short nose and long tail. "Is n't he lovely," she said, going towards the little horse.

"Nonsense, Mary!" said her uncle. "You are coming in the buggy with me." He had left his horse and buggy in town when he went to Chicago. "Your trunk will come along out to the ranch on the stage this afternoon."

Mary was patting the pony's neck.

"Uncle Billy, I 'd love to ride this horse just a minute!" she said. "What 's his name?"

"Tom!" said her uncle. "Well, get on him for a minute, then. Up you go!"

He lifted Mary into the saddle, and she took the bridle.

"Lead Tom up and down slowly, Charlie. Give Mary a little ride while we're getting her trunk," said Uncle Billy.

"All right," answered the boy.

Charlie led the pony down the road past the engine, walking very slowly, then he crossed the track and began going faster and faster. The boy began to run, the horse began to trot. As he broke into a canter, Charlie tossed the halter to Mary. She caught it, grasped the saddle, and held fast while the broncho galloped off towards home.

"Whoa! Whoa!" she cried, but still the broncho dashed along. She clutched the leather with both hands hearing the whirring of the wind in her ears, while the broncho ran out to the open country. All the world seemed to be made up of horse and girl!

CHAPTER II

AT THE RANCH

"Hi there, Tom! Hi! Hang on, Mary, hang tight! I'm coming for you. Don't be afraid!" Mary heard as if in a dream a voice shouting, "Hang on, Mary!"

Uncle Billy rode up beside her on Charlie's pony, grasped her bridle rein, and galloping beside her, gradually brought the broncho Tom to a standstill.

"Good for you, darling! I thought I never should catch up with you."

"I was n't afraid," said Mary.

"Of course not! You hung on like a good one. We'll have to put you up as a champion rider at the races, Frontier Day!"

"I was n't afraid!" repeated Mary, sitting erect. Her cheeks were red, her heart was beating fast; she had never felt so happy in her life. She leaned forward and patted Tom on the neck.

"Of course you were not! But Charlie had better be afraid, starting you off for a runaway! Just wait until his mother catches him." He

turned the pony around, and holding fast to the halter walked him back to the station. Mary sat up holding the bridle, feeling like a horse-woman. Fred and Bert came riding to meet them, but Charlie kept out of sight. When they were ready to start for home he started too, but rode far behind, leading the extra pony.

Mary went in the buggy with her uncle, while the others galloped on ahead. On either hand the open country stretched off towards the mountain range. The plain was covered with yellowish grass; once in a while a settler's cabin came in sight.

Far at the right a wide green belt of cottonwood trees marked the course of the river. Beyond were hills of strange colored earth; above these, white mountain peaks. It rained before they got home, then the white peaks shone out, a broad band of rainbows. Below, clouds and sunshine played, throwing wonderful lights and shadows over the face of the mountain range.

"Oh—h!" said Mary after a long silence, snuggling close to Uncle Billy's side. "I am so glad I came!"

Red Top Ranch extended for several miles along the river at the foot of Mount Merwin. Its name came from the field of mountain grass called red top that grew on the river meadow.

Mr. Merwin's house stood about half a mile from the main road, close by the swiftly-flowing Laramie. It was a roomy place, two stories in height, made of huge pine logs with the bark hewed off. Near it at the left was a bunk-house for the hired men. There was a large log barn, a carriage-house, and a corral.

As Dick and the buggy drew near, a shepherd dog, two hounds, and a queer long-nosed yellow dog bounded out, all barking welcome to their master.

"Oh, look at the dogs!" Mary exclaimed with delight. Mrs. Merwin, who had got home first, hurried out into the porch. The sound of a lamb bleating came round the corner of the house and Charlie appeared carrying a fat one in his arms, but when he saw his mother he dodged out of sight again.

"What is Charlie going to do with that lamb, Uncle Billy?" asked Mary with intense interest as she climbed over the wheel.

"He is going to put it where it can't get into the alfalfa," he replied. "Alfalfa is that stuff over yonder, Mary, something like clover." He pointed with his buggy whip to a field of lucerne beyond the barn.

"Come in to the house, Mary," said her aunt. "You'll have plenty of time to get rested before dinner."

"Oh, Aunt Kate, I don't want to get rested! I want to see everything," said Mary.

"Fireball is the most important thing on this ranch, but I'm afraid she's running out in the bunch."

"In the bunch!" echoed Mary delightedly. "Oh, now I know I've got here!" and she danced up and down.

"Come along then," said Aunt Kate. She took her hat down from an antler of the antelope hat-rack and went out with Mary.

They went past a large fowl-yard where several hens were leading broods of chickens about, and crossed a small irrigating ditch, made to bring the water from the river for the fields, then on over a rise of ground. At a distance a herd of horses was feeding. Mrs. Merwin shaded her eyes with her hand and looked.

"I declare, I can't see the mare," she said. She put her fingers to her mouth and gave a loud shrill whistle. "Fireball is n't there. If she were, she would look up at my call."

"How long have you had her?" asked Mary.

"We raised her from a colt. Her mother is Venus, a famous racing mare. I rode her at Cheyenne last Frontier Day. She is that bay at the left of the bunch."

"Is she a broncho?"

"Dear me, no! She's a thoroughbred."

Come, let's go back and start one of the men out to look for Fireball. She must have jumped the fence again."

They went to the house and at the pump beside the kitchen door they found three hired men washing their hands and faces for dinner. Mrs. Merwin spoke to the tallest, darkest, of the three.

"Bud, Fireball's got away again. Will you look her up as soon as you have your dinner?"

"Yes, Mis' Merwin." He straightened himself. "I reckon this is the young lady from the East?"

"Yes. Mary, this is Bud Todd, your uncle's right-hand man."

Mary and Bud smiled at each other and were friends from that moment. Mrs. Merwin went on into the house just as the queer yellow dog came sniffing around Mary.

"What a peculiar looking dog!" she said, patting his head. "What is his name?"

"Numskull."

"What kind of a dog is he?"

"One half coyote, t' other half fool," answered Bud.

"Oh," said Mary politely, wondering at his reply; then she asked, "Do you think you'll have to go far to find Fireball after dinner?"

"Well, between you and me, I should n't wonder if she was over there on the island. She

knows there's some good grass on the meadow back of that clump of cottonwoods."

Bud turned to finish washing. Mary slipped away down to the bridge. This bridge, that crossed the Laramie River, was not made of lumber but of cottonwood poles fitted closely together, with under-pinning very strong and firm, to withstand the spring freshets. When the snow begins to melt, the river comes roaring bank-full down the valley, but in July it was shallow above the bridge. Below was a fine deep pool where Mr. Merwin often caught trout for breakfast. Mary stopped for a moment half way across and looked over the railing at the bright shallows. "I'll ask Aunt Kate to let me go wading there some day," she thought; then she went on to the island. She walked up the bank, and crossed a little inlet on a single plank, feeling very daring as she saw the water fully two feet deep beneath her. She hurried on along the grassy bank exploring and came to a thicket of alder trees.

Just beyond was a beautiful sunny place where the river was broad and shallow, and the water rippled musically over shining sands.

On the shore, just lifting her graceful head after a drink, was a bay mare with long black mane and tail. Her silky coat shone gold in the sunshine. There were black points close to her

feet on her slender legs. She heard some one coming and turned her head to look. Mary saw her fine pointed ears and her big friendly eyes.

As Mary came nearer, the mare whinnied as if to say *How-do-you-do!*

"Oh, what a perfect beauty you are!" cried Mary. "Is n't your name Fireball?"

"Yes, my name is Fireball," answered a deep grumbling voice.

Mary jumped and looked around. Nobody was in sight.

"Fireball!" repeated the deep voice. It came from the alder thicket.

"You must be hungry for your dinner, Charlie Merwin!" said Mary. "I know it's you!"

"Father won't let me have dinner in the house because I gave you a nice fast gallop on that pony," said Charlie, coming out of the bushes. "I'm going to catch a trout, and roast him on some coals by and by."

The mare whinnied as if she wanted attention.

Mary pulled a handful of grass and went up to her. Fireball pawed the sand and neighed again. Mary gave her the grass and patted her nose. The mare nozzled against her, and Mary threw both arms around her neck and gave her a kiss between the eyes. After that they were firm

friends. Mary walked a little distance away and whistled as her aunt had done. Fireball came trotting up to her. She patted her and hugged her again and gave her some more grass.

"Oh, I wish I could get up on your back this minute," she said.

"I'll hold her nose if you'll try. She'll stand still for you all right," said Charlie, who had followed.

Then Fireball did a very pretty thing. She dropped to the ground, looking at Mary with kind eyes.

"Oh, you darling!" cried Mary.

"She wants to give you a ride. That's a trick mother taught her when she first began to ride her," said Charlie.

With a beating heart Mary jumped up on the mare's back, and sat astride.

Fireball slowly and gracefully got to her feet again, and stood quite still. Mary chirruped, half timid, half delighted, and Fireball turned and walked slowly towards the house, Charlie trudging along at her side to the bridge.

Mary felt her courage grow, and as her aunt came round the milk-house and Fireball, stepping daintily off the bridge, began to trot, she laughed aloud.

"Well, I declare, Mary Lloyd!" exclaimed



Fire Ball dropped to his knees, and Mary got on his back

Mrs. Merwin. "Billy, do come and look at this child!"

Mary was patting Fireball's neck and smiling happily as her uncle came to the doorway.

"That horse was trained for you, I guess, Mary," said her uncle. "Down!"

The mare dropped to her knees again, and Mary got off, laughing. The coyote dog came bounding to her for a pat on the head, then she gave Fireball another hug and ran and slipped her hand into her uncle's.

"Can't Charlie have his dinner in the house, please, Uncle Billy?" she coaxed. "He's starving over on the island."

"Starving, is he? Well, seeing it's you, we'll forgive him, this time. Now run in and get a lump of sugar for Fireball."

Mary fell asleep that night to the sound of coyotes howling up in the hills. When she woke next morning, in her cosy bed-room with pink rosebuds on the wall-paper, she felt very stiff. That runaway ride on the broncho after the long journey had been almost too much for her. But who would think of lying in bed on such a lovely day! She could hear the busy sounds of the morning. People's voices, poultry clucking, dogs barking, lambs bleating, horses neighing. And with all sounded the songs of birds and the rippling of the river.

Mary dressed and ran down-stairs. Everybody had had breakfast, but her Aunt Kate soon gave her some on the dining-room table.

Bert came in while she was at the table.

"Well, Mary," he said, "I hope you don't feel too tired this morning to come out and run a race on Tom?"

"Let the child alone, Bertie," said his mother.

"I'll be out in a minute," said Mary.

Not for anything would she say how stiff she felt.

"Don't talk horse to-day. Give Mary time to get rested from her journey before you put her on a horse again," said Mrs. Merwin. "How should you like to go and look about the place with Bert, my dear, while I am busy this morning?"

"Can't I help you?" asked Mary.

"No, thank you. Some other time."

"I'll show you my bottle colt," volunteered Bert. "A lady came out here visiting from Laramie and the mare she drove left us a colt. They could n't spare the mother to stay any longer, so they gave me the colt to raise. I have to feed it from a bottle."

"How funny! I want to see it!"

"Wait till I get its milk." When Bert came back from the milk-house he had two pop-bottles full of new milk, and soon he and Mary went out

together to the lot beyond the barn to feed Bert's pet. The colt was a small forlorn looking creature, but very fond of the hand that fed him. He came trotting up to Bert, who gave Mary one of the bottles to hold. Then he held the other up high and the colt stretched his neck to get his dinner as when his mother was with him. Bert held the pop-bottle so that the flow of milk was slow, and the colt placidly drank with a look of content, while Mary watched with interest.

"Do you ever feed calves this way?" she asked.

Bert laughed. "No," he said. "When we take them from their mothers young, we just hold their noses down into a pail of milk. They learn how to drink all right in a few days, but this fellow didn't begin young enough."

When the colt had finished, Bert and Mary rinsed the milk bottles at the pump, left them sunning on a shelf, then strolled off down the river. Bert took Mary to see a place where once he caught a beaver in a trap on its way down stream, as his father used to trap many beavers when he first came to Wyoming.

"The trout are jumping for all they are worth this morning," Bert made comment as they slowly passed the second shallows below his beaver trap. When they came to the third

shallows and he saw them full of trout, Bert got excited.

“Wait here a minute! I must run and get my tackle,” he said, and darted away through the alder thickets towards the house.

Bert's intentions were the best when he left his cousin alone. He meant to be back in a few minutes. But his brother Charlie had taken his favorite rod and gone up river trout fishing. Of course Bert felt that he must scurry up the bank, find his brother, and recover his property. This took time and trouble, for Charlie was having good luck with that rod and hated to be disturbed. Then Bert thought that as he had already been gone so long it would not matter if he took a little more time and caught a few grasshoppers for bait.

When at last after wandering over the island meadow, he crossed the river and came back to the spot where he had left Mary, she was nowhere to be seen. Bert took it for granted that she had got tired of waiting for him and gone to the house; so after trying his luck in the third shallows for a time in vain, he went back up the river where Charlie was successfully whipping the stream.

Mary had not gone to the house. She had strolled on till she came to a broad place in the river where a fence of cottonwood poles crossed

the stream. Beyond was a beautiful meadow. It looked as if wild strawberries might grow over there, so Mary climbed up on the first length of fence and edged her way out over the water. She found that she was not a bit afraid. The water rushed under, bright and sparkling in the sunshine. The poles were strong and firm, so Mary decided to cross the river on the fence. It was slow work, but great fun, walking sidewise, foot over foot, and clinging to the upper rail, hand over hand. She made her way over easily, but when she got to the farther end of the fence it was hard to get ashore. The fence ended against a bank where an old cottonwood tree had been blown down; its trunk and branches made a huge mass difficult to get through. But Mary was not to be stopped now. She grasped a bough, scrambled through a lot of broken branches, tearing her dress and scratching her hands, and was soon out on dry land beyond the tree in the beautiful meadow.

The grass was waving in the breeze, and wild flowers blue and yellow seemed beckoning her to come and pick them. Mary gathered a handful as she went on, searching for strawberries. From behind a bush a bevy of prairie chickens flew upwards with a sudden whirr, up and away towards the mountain that loomed blue in the yellow sunshine.

Mary went nearly a quarter of a mile down the meadow; then she turned and strolled back again.

She was near the place where the fence crossed the river when she sat down to rest upon a flat stone, and imagined that she heard a queer, rattling sound. She sprang up in a panic, and ran towards the river as fast as she could go, climbing over the old tree quickly, and out on the fence again. She was climbing along towards the homeward side, when all at once she heard—and this time it was not imagination—a loud, rattling sound. She hung over the fence rail, and felt herself growing cold with fear.

“Snakes, snakes!” she moaned. She had always had a horror even of garter snakes at home, so you can guess how she felt when she saw, in the grass close by the place where she must get off, two enormous rattlesnakes. Her hands shook so that she could hardly hold to the fence; her arms were all gooseflesh. Her throat grew dry; she choked and sobbed. One of the rattlesnakes wriggled out in plain sight and came a little nearer the river bank.

“Oh—h!” screamed Mary. It was a piercing scream, for in her fright she believed that the snake was going to crawl out on the fence rail and attack her.

CHAPTER III

THE RED SIGNAL OF DISTRESS

THE rattlesnake lifted his head. Mary screamed again. The snake lifted a little higher, as if looking to see what the sound might be. Mary was sure now that he was going to jump out at her, and she gazed in terror so great that her voice did not come at all. She stared at the serpent with eyes that seemed to be coming out of her head, while her arms clung convulsively to the fence rail. It was only a short time, but it seemed a long, long while before the rattlesnake wriggled away in the grass where his partner had already gone. Mary was just beginning to breathe freely after her choking pain, when a third snake, bigger than either of the others, came rattling into sight and settled himself as if for a sleep beside the first pole of the fence on shore. Mary crept along the fence nearly to the farther shore. But she dared not land on that side either. The old cottonwood tree, the bank, the meadow, all that had been so pleasant, now seemed full of terror.

She curled her little arms about the fence post and looked down at the bright rushing water and wondered if she would have to stay there until she starved and grew faint and fell into the water and drowned. The water was not very deep, perhaps she might wade ashore, but then ——

“Oh, dear! Oh, dear!” sighed Mary. “How dreadful it would be to be killed by rattlesnakes!”

She clung sobbing to the fence for two long hours. The sun climbed high towards the noon-day sky, and she began to be very hungry. She crept along the fence again and looked at the spot where that monstrous snake had laid himself down. He was gone, but she dared not step on the land where he had been.

All at once she heard a yelp; Numskull, the coyote dog, came bounding around the alder thicket and stood wagging his tail in a friendly way.

“Oh, you lovely dog!” said Mary, and tears rained down her face.

Numskull wagged his tail harder and stood looking at her as if to ask,—

“Why in the world don’t you come to land?”

“Good doggie!” said Mary. “Don’t let the snakes get you, poor doggie.”

Numskull jumped about and yelped, waiting for her to come. At last by the wisdom inherited

on his mother's side from a family of shepherd dogs, he grasped the truth,—this little girl was in trouble. Perhaps he thought she was caught by her dress and could not get ashore. At all events, he came as close to her as he could. He plunged into the water and floundered into the stream. He went ashore and floundered in again.

Then Mary had a bright idea. She took off her red hair-ribbons and tied them together. She edged along the fence nearly to the bank, called the dog to her and knotted the ribbons about his neck.

“Now, go home! Go home! Go find my Uncle Billy,” she commanded. “When he sees this red signal of distress he will come and rescue me! Go home!” But Numskull thought she was playing with him and did not start, nor did he go until he got hungry; then he trotted off as if expecting her to follow. Mary could not know that when her uncle, going into the house for his noonday dinner, saw the dog with the red ribbon collar, he only smiled and said to himself,—

“It is nice to have a little girl playing about the ranch.”

It was not until Bert came from his dinner, late as usual, and later, for he had a string of trout for an excuse, that his father asked:

“Where's Mary?”

"She went with Bert," answered Mrs. Merwin, serving the pie. "Is she coming in, Bertie?"

Bert stood stricken in the doorway.

"Where is she?" demanded his mother, getting up from her chair in alarm.

"Why—she—I ——" Bert stammered.

"Now, don't get scared, mamma," said Mr. Merwin. "What have you got to say, young man? Don't stand stuttering there!"

"I thought Mary came back to the house. I went to get my tackle of Charlie. He had no business to carry it off. I haven't seen her since."

"Since when?" asked Mr. Merwin, sternly, rising.

"They went out after breakfast," said Mrs. Merwin. "I supposed of course Mary was with you, Bertie, all this time."

"So this is the way you take care of your cousin, is it? I'll attend to your case, later. First thing is, where did you leave her?" demanded Mr. Merwin.

"By the deep pool," answered Bert.

"You've probably drowned her," growled Charlie.

Mrs. Merwin turned white and sat down on a chair. Her husband put his hand on her shoulder.

“Hush your noise, Charlie. Don’t get scared, mamma,” he repeated. “Just call Shep, Fred, and we’ll soon find her. She can’t be very far away.”

Bert rushed out of the house. Fred went to call the big shepherd dog, and they all, except Bert, started up the river. For there was a deep pool up stream too, and they thought that was the one Bert meant.

Bert, his conscience whipping him, was rushing away alone down the river bank to the place where he left his cousin. Numskull with the red ribbons round his neck bounded at his side. Bert found Mary’s footprints in the grass going on down for a little way, then at the sands by the first shallows he lost track of them. He decided that Mary had gone across as he should have done at that attractive wading place; so he took off his shoes and stockings, and waded across the stream. He followed what he thought was Mary’s trail, a broken twig here, bent grass there, across the island to the Old Channel where in their days of friendship he and Charlie sometimes mined for helium, gold, or copper ore. When he looked round for the coyote dog, Numskull was nowhere to be seen.

Mary’s arms ached, her legs ached; she ached from head to foot, but most of all her heart ached. She longed to be safe with her Uncle Billy.

Numskull came back to her alone, the red ribbons around his neck.

"Good doggie!" said Mary. "Did you go home?"

The dog wagged his tail encouragingly. He had had his dinner. Perhaps he wondered why Mary did not come for hers. His presence kept up her courage. She could not have clung there a long hour more without breaking down had it not been for the dog. He almost made her laugh staring at her with his solemn face, and funnily shaped eyes.

Mr. Merwin did not decide that they were on the wrong trail until they had gone past the deep pool a mile up stream, as far as the ranch of Oggerson, a settler whose house stood near the river. Nothing had been seen of Mary and no trace of her was found. They met Bert near the house when they came back, returning from his scouting of the Old Channel region. His father was divided between wrath at his son and at himself when he found that Bert meant the deep pool down stream.

Mr. Merwin left the family, starting on foot down the bank and throwing a bridle on old Harry, a gray farm-horse, trotted down the road, through the gate, across the bridge and into the lower meadow.

Thus it was that he came on his horse to the

farther shore, back of the fallen cottonwood, and saw Mary clinging to the fence in midstream and Numskull capering on the home shore.

"Well, I declare that dog knew more than I did!" thought Mr. Merwin. Aloud, he called in a gentle voice:

"Well, Mary, are you practising to walk across Niagara Falls on a tight rope?"

She turned a pitiful little face towards him and tried to smile.

"Oh, Uncle Billy, I *am* so glad to see you! Don't let the snakes get you!"

"Snakes, my dear?"

"Big snakes! big rattlesnakes!" she sobbed. "They are most all on this other side of the river!"

"Well, don't you be afraid. You stick there, honey. Uncle Billy will come and see about them."

He got down, cut two long, strong, pliable whips of alder, and leaving Harry on the farther side came out on the fence to Mary.

"Poor little darling! How long have you been hanging here?" he said, putting his arm around her.

"All day!" She leaned against him with a happy sob, feeling very safe and contented. "It seems like a thousand years."

"Where were your snakes?"

"Over there." She pointed.

"Well, you stick here a minute, honey. Uncle Billy will go and see if he can't whip them and get a rattle for you."

"No, no, don't leave me!" She clung to him, convulsively. There was nothing for it but to take her back the way he had come. Soon they were both on old Harry's back, Mary in front with her uncle's arm round her while they ambled along towards home. Numskull, who had forded the stream to follow, trotted beside them. They had crossed the bridge and gone through the gate and were in the open pasture when suddenly they saw writhing across the road in front of them a huge rattlesnake.

"O-oh! There he is!" screamed Mary.

"Lucky I kept these whips!" said her uncle.

"Sit still, chick!" He sprang to the ground, gave Mary the bridle, and just as the big rattler raised his head he ran and brought the whip down cuttingly on the snake's head. The snake fairly lifted his body from the ground. Again the whip came down full force upon him. Mary shuddered and clutched old Harry's mane while the battle went on, and on, blow after blow, thud, thud, thud! till the rattlesnake lay quiet on the ground. Then Uncle Billy threw handfuls of earth on his head, and, stooping, counted his

rattles and picked off the largest one, as if he were picking a rosebud.

"Seven rattles, and here's the biggest one of them all for you," he said, coming back to the horse.

"No, thank you," said Mary. "You—you keep it, Uncle Billy. I think you're the bravest man in the world!"

"Why, what makes you think that?" he asked, as he jumped up behind her on the horse again.

"Nobody else would dare fight a big snake all alone like that!"

"Oh, yes, they would, darling. That's the way we all kill rattlesnakes in Wyoming. I killed one with nine rattles with a buggy-whip once. Your aunt has got a belt made of his skin. Don't you want a belt of this one?" He reined in as they were about to pass the dead snake.

"No, no, no!" shuddered Mary. "Let's hurry home. I want my dinner. I never was so hungry in my life."

It was several days before Mary felt like going away from the house. She was not ill, only tired, and she felt safer lying on the sofa reading a story-book or sitting on the porch steps while her aunt sat sewing in a rocking-chair.

But one morning she saw from the kitchen steps a number of horses out in the corral, and went across to have a look at them.

“Well, here you are, Mary,” said her uncle from the stable door. “Pick your horse out of the bunch. You don’t want to lose any more time learning to ride, such a good horsewoman as you are.”

“All right, Uncle Billy.”

Mary climbed up to the middle pole of the fence and put her arms over the top. “I choose that big gray horse we came home on.”

“Old Harry’s all right. Run him in here, Fred, and put Bert’s saddle on him for her.”

Mary went into the stable and watched her cousin saddle and bridle the horse. Then he led him out, and her uncle took her foot in his hand and she mounted with an easy jump.

Harry stood still during this process, nor did he move when Mary clutched the bridle and chirrupped to him to start. Not he! Mr. Merwin struck him with a stick, but Harry did not stir except to lift one heavy leg ponderously.

“Bring out Dick, Fred,” said Uncle Billy. “Now, Mary, make Harry follow!”

He jumped on Dick, the carriage horse, and trotted off towards the big gate.

Harry lunged forward, walking slowly after Dick. Mary sat upright in the saddle. Fred came and handed her a cottonwood stick for a whip.

"Don't be afraid, Mary. Go 'long there, Harry!" he called.

But Mary was very much afraid. At the bridge across the first irrigating ditch Harry stopped short again.

"Go on, you stubborn brute," said Mary, hitting him timidly.

"Come along, Mary, make him go!" called her uncle, well in advance.

"Hit him again!" called Fred. "Grab leather, and hang on."

She did not like to strike the horse again. "Come, Harry," she coaxed, "please go on!"

Fred ran and gave him a good cut, then Harry walked rapidly after Dick up to the big gate.

Uncle Billy showed Mary how to turn him around, then Dick struck out on a fast trot for the corral. This suddenly filled Harry with rivalry. He gave a plunge forward, and broke into a long clumsy lope. Mary's heart thumped and she held fast to the saddle. Her uncle looked over his shoulder when he crossed the ditch and she seemed to him to be all right. But instead of crossing the bridge Harry lurched suddenly down to the stream for a drink. When he stopped heavily, putting his head down for the water, it was too much for the girl from the East. Over his head she went, splash into the irrigating ditch, splash into the ice-cold snow water!

CHAPTER IV

THE STAMPEDE.

UNCLE BILLY came cantering back, shouting comfort to Mary. She had fallen into a shallow place, against the soft bank; then quickly scrambled up to solid ground, crying no longer, but angry and ashamed. She stood there dripping wet, trying to smile and pretend she did not care.

"Get home with you," said Uncle Billy, giving the horse a whack with his cottonwood stick that sent him trotting towards the corral. "Well, Mary!" He turned to her. "You do look damp. Can't you stick on a horse any better than that?"

"I can stick on a horse! I stuck on two horses all right the day I got here," answered Mary with spirit. "I don't call Harry a horse. I call him a horrid old cow! Let me get up on Dick!"

"Good for you!" said her uncle and put her astride the barebacked horse. But he kept one hand on hers as he walked beside, leading Dick back to the corral.

Aunt Kate was very sweet and comforting. When Mary went to her room to get into dry clothes she came up-stairs with her and helped her, and told her how she fell off a horse when she was a little girl.

All the rest of that day Mary sat and read. She did not care to talk much with anybody, not even Bud Todd, who brought her a bunch of white cactus flowers, "ditch-lilies" he called them. She wrote a long letter home at her uncle's desk in the sitting-room, telling her family that she wished they were all there at the ranch, and that she was having a splendid time. Just as she was finishing the letter, she heard through the open window Bert saying to Charlie outside:

"Mary's all right. That girl does n't tease worth a cent."

"You bet she's all right!" said Charlie. "I'm glad she's going to stay all summer."

Next day Mary was ready again for whatever fun was going. She was out by the milk-house with her aunt, when Fred came loping along on his own horse Nibs, and reined in.

"Come along, Mary," he called. "I am going up to the big dam this morning. Do you want me to saddle Harry for you?"

"No, I thank you. Saddle Fireball!" answered Mary. "May I ride her, Auntie?"

"Yes, if you want to. She will take good care of you."

Away went Mary to the kitchen for some sugar, then out to find Fireball who came trotting to meet her as soon as she heard her whistle. In a few minutes Bert's saddle was on the mare's back and Mary was riding beside Fred along the river road. On the way to the dam they passed a field of alfalfa belonging to the settler Ogger-son. At a short distance a herd of several hundred cattle were feeding on the mountain-side.

"Those are our steers," said Fred. "Father had them turned out there just before he went to Chicago. It kept us fellows busy mending Ogger-son's fence to keep them out of his alfalfa."

"I should think he would mend his own fence," said Mary.

Fred's pleasant gray eyes looked at her with a smile in them.

"You would, would n't you? But Oggerson believes in giving other folks all the trouble he can. Father's too good a neighbor to him. Think you'd like to try a little canter?" Fred shook Nibs's bridle. The broncho broke into a run. Fireball picked up her pretty feet and carried Mary rapidly after him all the way to the dam. The river was wide there and deep. Just below the dam the big Pioneer ditch led away towards the ranches that were watered by smaller

irrigating ditches fed from this large one. In the high dry country of the west, this is the way men water their meadows where they grow the hay that they feed to their cattle during the winter-time.

Mary was very much interested watching Fred inspect the dam to make sure that none of the water was leaking away. The ride home was longer than going, for they returned along the side of the mountain and passed the herd of cattle feeding below the jack-pines.

"How strong those cattle look!" said Mary.

"You'd think they were strong, if you happened to see them on a stampede," returned Fred.

"What is a stampede?"

"Well, it is when they all start and run a few miles pell-mell as if they were possessed," answered her cousin. "Father has a theory that electric disturbances in the air have something to do with it, but I don't know. Bud says it's the dickens gets into them."

"Did you ever see a stampede?" Mary asked her Aunt Kate as she sat sewing with her again next day.

"Oh, yes. I have been out on a pony more than once helping round up the cattle after they have run off," answered Mrs. Merwin.

"I wish you would teach me how to ride beautifully as you do, won't you, Auntie?" said Mary.

"Do you like my riding, chick? Well, we'll do the best we can for you. First of all we must send to Laramie and get a saddle just your size. Bert's saddle is too big for you."

"How perfectly lovely to have a saddle all my own!" Mary patted her aunt's hand affectionately. "You are all so good to me."

During the week after her new cross-saddle came Mary rode Fireball every day. Her Aunt Kate rode Venus and taught the little girl how to sit, how to hold her whip, and most of all,—and this is in the secret of self-control,—to conquer fear of a horse.

"But I'm not a bit afraid of Fireball, Auntie," said Mary. They were riding slowly along the river road, side by side. "And you know I was n't afraid of Tom that first day when he ran with me!"

"Yes, but a good horsewoman must ride almost any horse that's offered her. If a horse once knows you are afraid there is trouble ahead," said Aunt Kate. "Don't you want to jump off now, dear, and let me show you a trick I've taught Fireball? The boys are always showing off on their bronchoes, and I try to keep up with them."

Mary got off and held Venus's bridle. Her aunt mounted Fireball, and touched her on the neck with the whip. Fireball stood up on her

hind legs and began to dance. Mrs. Merwin touched her neck and Fireball got down and went round and round.

"Would she dance that way with me?" called Mary.

"Yes, if you touched her just exactly as I did," replied her aunt.

"You would n't dance very hard, would you, Fireball?" coaxed Mary.

The beautiful animal looked at her with kind eyes that seemed to say:

"Oh, little tenderfoot, you may trust me!"

On the morning of the Fourth of July Mary was wakened at sunrise by the sound of pistols firing, crackers popping, and dogs barking under her bedroom window. She got up and looked through the shutters. Her cousin Fred with Bud, Jim, and Donnelly, the hired men, stood in a row, shooting into the air. Bert and Charlie were firing off crackers.

Mary dressed rapidly; as she hurried downstairs she met her Uncle Billy coming into the entry in his dressing-gown.

"S-s-h! Mary," he whispered with a face of fun. "Don't let the boys know we are up. We'll show them how to make a noise that *is* a noise." He took down his rifle from the antlers. "Run and bring that gong bell that stands on

the shelf in the wood-shed. Go quietly and bring it to your room." He went on up-stairs. Mary hurried and got the big bell and was soon back in her room. When her uncle had loaded his rifle, he quietly unhooked the shutters. The boys were making din enough to waken the seven sleepers. Uncle Billy nodded to Mary.

"Now, ring when I say three. One, two,—three!"

Mary rang the bell loudly with both hands. Her uncle flung open the shutters. Crack went his rifle. Numskull ran round and round in a circle, yelping wildly. Mary burst out laughing. The boys and the hired men stopped short and looked up astonished, while louder and louder rang the bell.

Aunt Kate appeared in Mary's doorway.

"For mercy sake, Billy, you are a bigger boy than any of them!" she exclaimed.

"Well, you would n't expect me to be smaller than any of them!" he retorted over his shoulder. He was just firing again.

Aunt Kate came to the window.

"Look! Look!" she cried. "I was afraid something was going to happen! There are all those steers breaking into Oggerson's field."

"Boys! Boys!" shouted Mr. Merwin. "Get after your ponies. Our steers are in Oggerson's meadow."

Pandemonium broke ranks at once. Boys and men made haste to get their horses and were off to chase out the cattle invading the field up river.

It was nearly nine o'clock when they came back to breakfast, but the cattle had all been driven out on the open plain.

"To-morrow the men must go and mend Oggerson's fence for him again," said Mr. Merwin as he took the cup of coffee his wife handed to him.

Mary was out on Fireball alone at the end of the day, just for a little ride to the gates. She had been down to the lower meadow and back, and up to the road and was coming slowly towards the house when she met her aunt strolling out to meet her and looking at the sunset. For twenty-five miles the whole western horizon looked like a series of houses on fire. Big red clouds were banked against big white clouds and streamed with long red flaming banners up into the sky.

"Look, Mary!" said her aunt. "Long as I've lived here, I never get tired of that splendid sight."

"It *is* splendid!" Mary turned Fireball and sat looking too, while her aunt stood with one hand on the horse's neck, gazing at the red, white, and blue sky.

Over their heads sailed a rocket; it splintered far off in all colors and fell to the ground.

"The boys are beginning early with their rockets," said Mary.

"Come on. Let's go up to the lake and see the reflections in the water," said her aunt. "Fireball can easily carry two such small people."

"Oh, do let's go, Aunt Kate! It will be such fun to ride double," said Mary.

Her aunt sprang up behind her. Fireball walked to the big gate, then along the main road and a half mile out on the plain to a pond that Mr. Merwin had made. Slowly they rode around the water, enjoying the color and the stillness.

They were returning and had mounted a rise of ground above the first buffalo wallow, when they heard a sudden roaring sound and saw coming straight towards them, all running full gait, the herd of cattle that the men had turned out on the plain.

At the moment a big scarlet rocket sailed low, and the stick fell splintering into the herd. The thousand cattle broke into a wild stampede. Mrs. Merwin jerked the rein. Fireball whirled round on the instant, put back her ears and ran for life, for her own life, for Mary's, and for that of the little woman who held her bridle rein.

"Don't be afraid, darling!" Mary heard her

aunt say. She could feel her aunt's heart beating against her shoulder. Her own heart thumped so that she could scarcely breathe, but she patted the mare's neck softly, murmuring:

"Good Fireball! Good horsie! Good Fireball!"

Nearer and nearer thundered the hoofs of the cattle. Mary bent forward as the mare ran faster. She felt her aunt's arm tighten about her as they flew onward towards the flaming west.

The good racing blood of her mother Venus was up in Fireball's young veins. She went as if shot out of a cannon's mouth, while close behind trampled the panic-stricken cattle with the force of a cavalry regiment.

On she went, minute after minute, mile after mile, keeping just in front of the rushing death behind. The western sky died to pale pink, then to gray; the last light of the sun was gone; the evening star shone out in the summer sky. It seemed like a dreadful dream that would never come to an end, the whipping of the breeze on her face, the thundering hoofs behind. Mary felt herself growing strangely weak.

"Oh, Aunt Kate, I'm going to fall off," she sobbed. "I'm going to fall off!"

"No, you're not going to fall off," said her aunt in a sharp voice. "No nonsense now! Sit tight!"

“Oh, I wish Uncle Billy would come!” moaned Mary, while Fireball flew over the plain, running just in front of the steers, galloping on and on into the night.

CHAPTER V

HELPING AUNT KATE

MR. MERWIN came into the ranch house for his supper about sunset; he walked into the kitchen with his string of trout, put his head in at the dining-room door and said:

"Kate, come and see what a fine lot of trout I've brought you."

"Mother is n't in the house," said Fred, looking up from his book by the dining-room lamp. "She and Mary went off up towards the lake double on Fireball awhile ago. All the rest of us have had our supper."

Just then Oggerson out by the corral was telling the hired men that he had seen the Red Top cattle stampeding beyond the lake as he came along the road. Bud Todd rushed in with a pale face and told Mr. Merwin and Fred. Three minutes later they were all galloping off towards the plain, silent before the fear and horror in their hearts.

The force of the stampede had just begun to lag, the cattle spread out in a straggling column, running still, but less wildly, when Fireball

slowed from her wonderful speed, breathing hard and covered with foam. Mrs. Merwin's courage began to waver but she clasped Mary closer, and urged the mare onward. Even if this should be Fireball's last race, the child she held in her arms must be kept safe. The brave thoroughbred mare, bridle-wise, responded to the call upon her and renewed her gait, her fine pointed ears flattening against her head, as if in resolve to die rather than fail them, as on and on she ran.

Out on the plain suddenly they heard the sound of shouting, and in among the steers rode Bud Todd and Fred and Oggerson rounding the bunch of cattle away from Fireball and her precious burden. And up towards the mare rode Uncle Billy on Nibs, the broncho's sides bleeding where the spurs had been hurrying him on for the fastest run he had ever made in his life.

"Ho! Kate! Kate!" shouted Mr. Merwin, hurrying towards them.

"Hoo-ooh!" whispered Aunt Kate, trying to answer. She could not speak aloud.

He galloped up beside, sprang to the ground, and caught them both off in his arms.

"It's a miracle the bunch did n't run you down before we got here," he said solemnly.

Aunt Kate slipped to the ground exhausted and sat with her arm clasped round his ankle, her head against his knee.

Mary's arms went round his neck and her head fell on his dear big shoulder. "Oh, I knew you would come," she whispered, sobbing. "I knew you would come."

"We did n't get here a minute too soon, little girl," he answered. "Nothing will be too good for Fireball after this." He reached out his hand and placed it caressingly on the neck of the panting mare.

Fireball carried only one rider on the slow return to Red Top Ranch,—the mistress who had loved her all her life,—for Mary stayed in her Uncle Billy's arms till he put the tired and drooping little girl down upon her bed in her own pretty room.

A few days later Mary was churning in the shade of the milk-house when her uncle came up to her and said:

"I'm going to drive up into the hills about ten miles this morning with Dick and the buggy. Do you know any little girl who would like to come along?"

Mary moved the churn-dasher briskly up and down.

"I'd love to go with you, but I can't leave my churning," she answered.

"Nonsense! Your aunt usually makes the butter when it's in that churn."

"She is baking some important cake this morning. The cook, you see, is washing towels. Mrs. Malley says you and the boys are fiends for towels!" Mary smiled affectionately up at him and stopped churning for a minute. "Besides, you know our secret," she whispered. "Auntie was crying this morning."

Uncle Billy's eyes grew misty, but he said, "All right for you! So you turn me down, do you? Even if you are my girl, you'll have to whistle for an invitation to go buggy-riding with me next time."

"Then I'll whistle," returned Mary cheerfully. "I have to help Auntie to-day."

"All right for you, Sissy!" Uncle Billy pretended to frown and stalked away. Mary at once set up a loud, clear whistle. He shook his head and put his fingers in his ears and hurried away. But he threw her a handful of kisses after he got into the buggy, and she sent him two or three from the tips of her fingers in return. Numskull bounded up, thinking that she was whistling to him.

Mary felt very useful and happy churning the butter. She had never seen butter made before she came to the ranch. It was only a small churning to-day. Her aunt had put the cream into the old-fashioned stone churn with the up-and-down dasher, instead of into the rotary patent churn used when there was a quantity of

cream. Mary lifted the lid and peeped in at the rich white cream. It was growing thicker and full of bubbles. She felt a funny, excited feeling in her throat.

"I do believe the butter is beginning to come!" she said aloud, staring in at it for a moment, fascinated. Then down went the cover again and splash went the dasher, up and down, up and down. In a minute or two Mary longed to look at it again.

"I'll wait till I count a hundred strokes," she said. "One, two, three!" and she went gaily on to a hundred. Then she peeped in. No change. "Five hundred!" Another peep below the dasher. Big round bubbles, thick puffy cream. "Five hundred again!" A third peep. "Oh, oh, oh! Aunt Kate, do come. Come, come!"

Mrs. Merwin appeared in the kitchen door with a broom-straw in her hand.

"The butter is all cuddled up to the dasher, and up and down the sides of the churn!" cried Mary excitedly.

Mrs. Merwin waved her broom-straw and disappeared. After a little while she came out with her white sun-bonnet on her head.

"I was just trying my cake when I heard you call," she said. "I thought something had happened."

"It has, it has! Just look!" Mary proudly showed the butter.

“Good! The butter came quickly for you. You have n’t been churning more than twenty minutes. Sometimes I have churned for an hour when I could n’t get the cream at the right temperature. It obeyed the thermometer this morning very nicely.”

Mary ran into the milk-house and got the big wooden bowl and ladle for working the butter, pumped the cold water over them, drained it off and brought them cool and fresh to her aunt. Mrs. Merwin carefully dipped out all the butter from the churn into the wooden bowl. She scraped off the bits on the dasher, then she carried the bowl into the milk-house.

“Now, I must run back to my cake in the oven,” she said. “You can work the butter for me till I can come.” She went out and shut the door. Mary stood on tip-toe and industriously worked the wooden ladle, watching the white buttermilk ooze from the yellow butter with great interest. She worked it for several minutes, then her aunt came back and finished the task, making the butter into rolls, printing each one with a wooden stamp that made a picture of a sheaf of wheat.

“Now, we must go and set that white hen. It’s a comfort to have you here to work and play with me, darling,” said Mrs. Merwin.

“I’m glad,” said Mary, and slipped her little hand into that of her aunt.

They went out to the poultry yard and from nest to nest collecting fresh eggs. On one of the nests sat a small reddish brown hen with a determined look in her eyes; she stuck out her head and gave Mary a peck on the arm as she reached into the next nest for three fresh eggs.

"Leave one of those for a nest-egg, Mary," said her aunt. "Brownie, behave yourself!" and she tapped the head of the irate little hen with a stick.

"I thought you shut her up the other day," said Mary.

"I did. Bert must have let her out. I have been trying to break up her nest for weeks. For mercy sake!"

Out from under the little brown hen squeezed a fluffy chicken and toddled along the board in front of his mother while she ruffled her feathers proudly and clucked and clucked.

"She has hatched a nest-egg! He's a nest-egg chicken," exclaimed Mary.

"Well, I never saw one before in all my life," said Aunt Kate. "Isn't he strong! He must have been one of those eggs left over when Blackie came off with her brood the other day. Yes, I did leave one in that nest for a nest-egg."

"As soon as we set old Whitie we'll go and get some food for Brownie's baby, won't we, Auntie?" said Mary.

After this surprising interruption they went on collecting until they had fifteen fresh eggs in the tin pan that Mary carried. She stood holding it while her aunt put them one at a time under the white hen, who ruffled her feathers and clucked and pecked, then settled down contentedly on the eggs.

They were turning away when they heard a loud fussy clucking and calling as of a hen in distress. Mary followed her aunt, who hurried over to the side of the poultry yard next the river and stood there beside the fence with an expression on her face, half amused, half pitying.

A large speckled hen stood on the brink of the river, clucking and calling anxiously, while out on the quiet water of a pool floated her brood of yellow ducklings, enjoying themselves immensely.

"Mother, may I go out to swim?" laughed Mrs. Merwin. "Poor old lady! This is the first time she has seen her darling daughters go out to swim, and she does n't know what to make of it."

"Are the ducks hers?" exclaimed Mary, in surprise.

"Yes. I put duck's eggs under her. I always feel sorry for a hen with ducks when they go into the water. But a hen is a better mother on land than an old duck. She will scratch more for worms and things for them."

Mary watched the ducklings paddling about.

"They float like water-lilies, don't they?" she said.

"I suppose so. We don't see many water-lilies out here. Your uncle says there is a tiny snow-water lake up in the high mountains where this river rises that he has seen fairly covered with water-lilies for a few days at a time in August. The snow water up there is so cold that the lilies don't live long when they get a chance to blossom."

As Mrs. Merwin and Mary went back towards the house they met Bert running to find his mother. He looked worried.

"Ma!" he called. "Come quick. The littlest lamb has busted himself! He's here by the bunk-house."

"Oh, dear, dear!" she said. "Run and find Bud Todd, Bertie!" she called in return, and hurried to the bunk-house. There in the shade a lamb lay dead on the ground. Its little sides were puffed out like an air-cushion. Bud Todd came hurrying with Bert.

"No use, Mrs. Merwin. It has stuffed itself to death all right in that blamed alfalfa."

"You're the one to blame, Bertie. You promised me to keep the lambs out of the alfalfa."

"No, ma; it's this fellow's own fault. He made a grand sneak on me. It's his own fault,"

replied Bert. "He squeezed through a place in the fence too small for him."

"Well, you must get poles and make that place too small for any of the others to get through. We'll go and count the rest of them, and see if they are all there."

"It's too bad, poor lamb," said Mary, with quivering lips.

Bert looked at her. "It's not my fault anyhow," he muttered doggedly.

Five happy lambs were enjoying life in the lot beyond the barn where they belonged, not missing their brother who had got away and eaten himself to death in the alfalfa field.

"I missed him, and I found him, and I lugged him to the bunk-house," sighed Bert.

"Well, Bud will bury him. Don't talk any more about it, Bertie," said Mrs. Merwin.

"This is n't a sheep ranch anyhow," muttered Bert.

In the cattle country of Wyoming ranchmen seldom raise sheep; the few sheep at Red Top were kept in limited quarters, for where sheep have nibbled grass the cattle cannot feed again for at least two years.

"Come along, Bertie, let's go and feed your bottle-colt again," said Mary. "I love to see him eat."

"All right. But it was that lamb's own fault he busted himself! It was n't my fault."

Mrs. Merwin went on into the house. After Mary had helped Bert feed his colt, she went in and joined her aunt. She helped make the beds, and dusted the sitting-room. Then they sat down and hemmed some kitchen towels until the cook came and said that dinner was ready. Mrs. Malley, the cook, was a tall, pale, silent Missourian, of middle age, who had lived at the ranch for nearly a year. After dinner Mrs. Merwin and Mary went to visit the grave of little Nelly. It was on the island meadow, not far from a ruined old log cabin. Uncle Billy had made a white picket fence around it and the little place was planted with wild rose-bushes. Mary slipped her hand in her auntie's and listened with love while she told her of the sweet ways of the little girl who was gone.

It was sunset when Uncle Billy came home. Mary was out with her aunt helping strain the new milk and put the pans up on the shelves in the milk-house when he came and looked in at the door.

"Goodness, girls! Has n't that butter come yet?" he asked.

"Yes, years ago! I'm glad you've come too," said Mary. She trotted over to him, and put up her face for a kiss. "There's hot

biscuits with butter on them that I churned.
Yes, sir!"

"I'll bet it's the sweetest butter ever churned," said Uncle Billy, giving her a hug with the kiss.

CHAPTER VI

THE LITTLE BUCKSKIN BRONCHO

MRS. MERWIN was busy at her sewing machine in the sitting-room. Mary was curled up near her in a corner of the sofa playing checkers with Charlie one day when Bud Todd came into the room. He brought her three wild strawberries on a grape-leaf.

"Compliments of the season, Miss Lloyd," he said taking off his sombrero. "I thought maybe you might like to taste the first fruits of the earth."

"Thank you very much, Bud," Mary smiled up at him. "Are n't they pretty! Won't you take one yourself?"

Bud looked gratified.

"I like better to see you eat 'em. Fact is—" he stood on his other foot, and hesitated. "Fact is, I have been wanting to tell you for some time what a comfort it is to see you around as usual."

"How nice of you!" Mary beamed at him.

"Yes. It did look to me that night you went off herding steers on the plain that we might not

see this little girl round this ranch any more. There's quite a bunch of mavericks out on the plain, I hear," he added.

"What are mavericks?" asked Mary.

"Any animal is a maverick that runs out wild till he's a year old or more without anybody's brand on him. He is public property after a year's time."

"Can anybody get him?" asked Mary.

"Yes, if they can run and catch him," answered Bud with a grin. "You have to pay five dollars into the school fund when you rope him and then he's yours. They say it's a good-looking lot of wild horses that's come down from the hills. I'm figuring on riding out to see if I can get sight of them."

"I wish I could go!" Mary stood up, her face alive with interest.

"You ask your aunt her opinion on the subject," said Bud.

"May I go with Bud, Aunt Kate?" she asked.

"No, indeed!" answered Mrs. Merwin. "I'm not going to have you riding out into a bunch of wild horses. Bud would forget all about you and be off trying to rope one of them."

Bud twirled his hat in his hands.

"I'm not figuring on roping any horses to-day, Mrs. Merwin," he said. "I'm just going

to take a look, and see if Oggerson's boy was giving it to me straight. If I do locate a bunch of mavericks, I was calculating I'd not lack for company to rope one. Maybe you would go along and look after Mary, you two riding the two mares, ma'am?"

Mrs. Merwin laughed.

"Take her along, Bud. Saddle Fireball and take her along for a scamper. But I trust to you. If you see the mavericks within a mile, you must make tracks for home."

Bud sighed, humorously.

"Nobody'd believe it of me, so I'm safe to promise," he said.

Mary and Bud rode out on the plain, he on Tom the broncho, she on Fireball. They turned to the left and cantered slowly toward the hills, the breeze blowing in their faces as they rode. They had gone three or four miles, and had mounted a hillock above a ravine when they saw about five hundred yards away feeding on the tender grass, ten or a dozen wild horses. In less time than it takes to tell it the horses threw up their heads and were off into the teeth of the rising wind.

"See 'em go! Don't they run like a bunched blizzard on the half-shell!" exclaimed Bud, reining in.

Suddenly one of the wild horses, a mouse-

colored broncho, stopped running and began to feed again.

"Little rat! He hates to leave good fodder," commented Bud.

The other horses disappeared up into the hills, but this broncho went on feeding. Mary and Bud rode slowly towards him.

"He's what we call a buckskin, that color of pony," said Bud as they drew nearer. "I take it he's the leader."

"Does he know the rest will come back if he stays here?" asked Mary.

"Right you are! You're cute enough to be a Wyoming girl," replied Bud, admiringly.

They rode quite near to the little buckskin broncho. He went on feeding peacefully.

"Blamed if he ain't the outlaw from Sheep Mountain! He acts as gentle as if he belonged in the corral," remarked Bud. "Well, that's where you're going to bring up, yet, bronk, do you hear?"

Mary pulled the rein for Fireball to go on, but the wise mare stood still, putting her pretty ears forward nervously.

"Blessed, if I don't hate to leave that bronk unroped out here," said Bud, "but we've got to make tracks for the ranch and get after this bunch first thing in the dewy morning."

"Are n't you afraid they will all be gone tomorrow?" Mary exclaimed.

"Not much! Not they!" Bud replied. "When a bunch like this once gets down from the hills they hang around for grass and water sometimes for a week or two. Well, so long, bronk! See you later. My love to the folks."

Bud waved his hat round his head, whooped and started on a gallop for home, while Mary cantered after. The truth was he had a very good rope on his big saddle and he dared not look at the outlaw another instant lest the desire to throw a noose over him should prove too strong. Nobody knew better than the old cowboy how unsafe it would be for the little girl on the thoroughbred should he and Tom get into a fight with that little buckskin broncho.

There was excitement at the ranch when Bud and Mary got back to the house and told the news of the outlaw seen with the mavericks up by the ravine. He was a well-known horse once owned by an Easterner who had moved back East to Iowa after the outlaw had nearly killed a man who tried to ride him.

Fred and Charlie wanted to start out with new ropes that night, but Mr. Merwin overruled them. A sunrise start was planned for all, master and men, sons and neighbors, for Oggerson and his boy were to join in the pursuit.

Mary was perched on the arm of her uncle's chair in the sitting-room after supper.

"I 'm going with you to-morrow," she said.

"You are, are you? Going to ride old Harry?"

"You need n't try to tease me." Mary pinched his ear. "Aunt Kate and I are going on Fireball and Venus to watch you all catch the buckskin broncho."

"I don't believe you 'll like it, pussy," he said with a sober face.

"Why don't you believe I 'll like it?" asked Mary.

"Do you want me to tell you?"

"Yes, of course."

Uncle Billy pulled her pretty blond head against his face and whispered:

"Because my little tenderfoot has a tender little heart."

"What do you mean?" she whispered.

"Take my advice. Don't go!" he whispered back seriously.

"Oh, but I want to! I could n't stand it, I 'd be so disappointed if I had to stay at home. Aunt Kate has promised to take me."

"Well, go to bed then, and get your beauty sleep. You 'll have to be up before daylight to-morrow."

He lifted her down, pretended to slap her, and pushed her from him.

"It's only half past seven! I don't want to go to bed so early, Uncle Billy," she protested.

"Well, you must go to bed. You have been leading the strenuous life ever since you came to Wyoming. You must go to bed and get rested if you are going out broncho-busting with me."

"Yes, Mary, go to bed," put in her aunt, who was sewing an elastic on Mary's riding-hat beside the sitting-room lamp.

"Are Charlie and Bert going to sit up?" Mary looked enviously at her cousins, both deep in a book on either side of their mother at the table.

"No. Those young men will go to roost as soon as they finish their chapters. Come, give me a good-night."

Mary obeyed, but she felt a sense of grievance as she went up-stairs, with her bedroom lamp in her hand. In Wyoming too it seemed children could not always do as they liked. She undressed, hurried through her prayers and got into bed, intending to stay awake until she heard Bert and Charlie come up-stairs.

Next thing she knew she heard her aunt's voice saying:

"Mary, Mary, it's half past seven!"

"Yes, I know it is!" she replied, sitting up.

Aunt Kate stood smiling in the door, her hat on her head, her crop in her hand, dressed in her cross-saddle riding-habit.

"Why, it's morning!" exclaimed Mary.

"I thought you were up, getting breakfast. I had mine long ago and I've been taking care of the milk. I sent Bert to call you."

"He did n't call me. I never heard him if he did."

"Well, hurry and get dressed. I'll go and see that there's something ready for you."

Mary jumped out of bed and was soon down in the dining-room.

"Has Bud gone?" she asked anxiously.

"Everybody has gone," said Aunt Kate. "Your uncle said for us to ride across towards Sheep Mountain. If he sees the outlaw with the wild horses they will cut him out of the bunch and run him down that way."

It was a brilliant morning, and birds were singing as they left the big gate behind, and struck out across the unfenced plain towards Sheep Mountain. Aunt Kate looked very pretty that morning in her green riding-habit against Venus's brown coat. Mary sat erect, riding Fireball. She looked and felt very happy. It was fun to see the dainty way Fireball stepped around the gopher holes that dotted the plain. When she cantered, she sprang over them as sure-footed as a cow-pony and much more graceful.

It was seven miles straight across the plain to Sheep Mountain. They had gone about half

way when Aunt Kate reined in, and Mary followed her example. Fireball whinnied excitedly, for towards them galloped nine horsemen and boys in pursuit of one little broncho, running like a deer. Mr. Merwin stood up in his stirrups, shouting and beckoning. Mrs. Merwin understood, and calling to Mary to ride ahead they made a quick detour, got out of the way of the wild horse, and rode to meet the friendly galloping ponies that quickly surrounded them. They turned Venus and Fireball about and rode on in company of the men and boys who were after the wild horse.

Bud suddenly dashed out in front and threw his lariat. The long-noosed rope swung snake-like through the air and fell upon the broncho. For a minute Mary thought it was round his neck, but the animal only flung up his heels and ran onward. Bud and Donnelly, Jim and Ogger-son's boy rode round him and headed him back towards Mr. Merwin and his sons and Oggerson.

"Keep behind us, now girls!" called Mr. Merwin to his wife and Mary, and he went for the broncho, throwing his rope as he rode full speed. The broncho half stopped and began to kick in every direction at once it seemed to Mary, who stood up in her stirrups in excitement, watching him fight for his liberty.

It was a wonderful fight that he made, one

little horse against five men, four boys, and nine cow-ponies, every pony trained to stand and hold a rope as in a vise when once its noose went round the body of an animal roped by the rider he bore. The buckskin broncho ran in every direction, in vain. He kicked and bit at the horses that came near him. He doubled and dodged the great ropes that sizzed through the air and swished after him. Bud's rope caught him at last and went round his quivering body. A powerful jerk from Bud's iron arms, a plunging pull of the pony he rode was answered by the little buckskin with a thrashing, kicking plunge, while the tightening rope burned into him as he still fought on. The more he struggled the more he tangled himself in the rope. Up rode Fred and roped him with a second noose. He reared and bucked and kicked. Then Bud jerked him again. At last he was thrown, and lay on his side on the earth. Bud sprang to the ground and sat down on the broncho's head, while he knotted his red neckerchief about the wild and starting eyes. Mr. Merwin and Oggerson got down and hobbled the broncho's feet, and Mr. Merwin got a hackamore ready to put round his neck. Then they all pulled him up on his feet again and began trying to get a saddle on his back. Mrs. Merwin galloped forward to the group, but Mary sat still on Fireball; both were trembling.

"You feel sorry for the poor horse, too, don't you?" murmured Mary, patting Fireball's neck.

Bud got up on his pony and galloped over to Mary.

"What makes you stay over here by your lonesome?" he inquired.

"Why don't you take some sugar in a pan and coax a horse to come up to you?" demanded Mary.

Bud looked at her with curiosity, then he grinned.

"Well, I don't rightly know," he said politely. "Busting bronks with sugar plums ain't ever been the fashion in Wyoming."

"Don't you want to set the fashion?" asked Mary sweetly. "I can spare some of Fireball's sugar for the poor little horse." She produced three lumps of sugar from the pocket of her little brown linen riding-jacket and held them out on her palm. Her blue eyes were shining.

Bud pulled his face down.

"Well, now, honest, I can't just seem to see myself feeding sugar to that there electric bell off the front door of—perdition," he said. "Talk about sulphur broth and chain lightning! He's just been giving me as pretty a fight as I ever had with a horse, but all the same the boys might be jealous if I went to handing him out candy."

"Very well, I will give it to him myself," said

Mary with dignity. She touched Fireball and rode over to the group about the captive, Bud following. She slipped to the ground.

"Hold Fireball for me please, Bud," she said; then she started to walk up to the buckskin with the lumps of sugar, but her uncle swooped from his saddle, and gathered her up in his arms. It was none too soon, for the buckskin was rolling like mad in the ropes that bound him, struggling blindfold in terror and darkness, feeling the saddle on his back just cinched round him by three pairs of hands. Tears started in Mary's eyes.

"Don't be silly, Mary," said her Aunt Kate, coming beside them on Venus as her uncle put Mary back on Fireball. "This is the way they always tame bronchoes."

"I don't see why," said Mary. "I don't believe any horse needs to be choked and beaten and thrown around like that. Why could n't they run him home and into the corral, and then let us feed him sugar through the fence till he got friendly? I don't believe you ever let them snarl Fireball up in cruel ropes that way! Just feel how she quivers! She does n't like it any better than I do. Come, Fireball, let's go talk to the poor horsie. Let's tell him he has two friends."

Mary started to ride towards the broncho, but her aunt seized her bridle.

"Don't be silly," she repeated. "Your uncle

won't let you come out to see them rope a horse if you act this way."

"I feel sorry for the horse," said Mary with quivering lip.

At that moment Bud made a sound of pain. He had been putting the hackamore round the broncho's neck, and the beast had contrived to bite his thumb.

"I feel sorry for Bud Todd," said Mrs. Merwin. "He does n't usually howl when he is hurt."

"Bud!" called Mary. "Come here and let me tie up your thumb." She was making a bandage of her handkerchief as she spoke. Bud came over watching her with a pleased look as she deftly tied up his bleeding thumb.

"I'll never go after a bronk again unless you come along to repair damages," he said. "Will you?"

"I'll see about it," said Mary with tact. In her heart she knew that she would never willingly go after a wild horse again.

"Come, Mary, I'll beat you home," called her uncle from Nibs's back, and she gladly dashed off with him across the plain.

I knew you would n't want to see the boys drag that bronk home, little tenderheart," he said, when first they slowed to a walk.

"You are the best uncle alive," said Mary.

"You're my girl!" he returned, and side by side they rode happily along.

As they drew up at the stable door the cook came hastily out from the kitchen, putting on her blue-checked sunbonnet as she ran. Mrs. Malley was usually quiet and rather pale. Now her face was flushed, her tongue stammered as she said very fast:

"Mr. Merwin, the sheriff has been ringing the telephone for you. Some young men broke out of jail at Laramie, and the telephone is out of order; I told him maybe you would ride up to Pine Landing and telephone from there.

"Did the sheriff say who broke jail?" Mr. Merwin asked.

"One of them is that Rap Nottinger that's in for shooting a cattle thief. The other is a fellow that belongs over in Colorado."

"Who is he? What is his name?"

The woman looked down, then up. Her face had queer streaks of color on it.

"I forget. That is —— The telephone is out of order. You can't make out what folks say," she replied.

"You heard his name?" asked Mr. Merwin.

She shook her head nervously.

"I was most scared to death!" she answered.

"Besides, I was baking my bread when the tele-

phone rang, and I worried for fear it would burn."

Mr. Merwin frowned and looked thoughtful. He glanced at Mary, who had slipped to the ground and stood by Fireball's head.

"Do you mind leading your mare down to the river and giving her some water when she cools off a little?" he said. "I guess I'll have to ride on to Pine Landing and telephone from there and see what the sheriff wants. You tell Bud Todd about this as soon as he gets here," he added, speaking to Mrs. Malley.

She nodded, then as he galloped away on Nibs, she burst into tears and ran sobbing into the house. Mary's heart ached to comfort her, so she tied Fireball to the fence and hurried after her into the kitchen.

As Mary entered the room with soft footsteps she was surprised first not to see the cook, then to hear the sound of voices overhead. Mrs. Malley's room was a large unfinished room comprising all of the low second story above the kitchen, from which it was reached by a narrow stairway. The door of this stairway stood open. Mary went to it, intending to call the cook, but as she reached the bottom step, she heard the sound of a man's voice saying earnestly:

"Please mother, don't cry like that! I tell you honest, I did n't do it. If I did kill him, I

would tell you just the same mother,—you! But honest I did n't. It was some other fellow that answers my description. You help me get away, mother, and you'll never be sorry. I'll make tracks off down to New Mexico, and I'll get a nice little home for you there and I'll send for you. You don't want me to go to jail, and maybe get hung for what I did n't do."

It all flashed clear through Mary's mind, Mrs. Malley had sent Mr. Merwin up to Pine Landing to telephone to gain a little time for her son. She loved her son. She wanted to save him. He was accused of a crime that he had not committed! Mary was sure of that from something in the tone of his voice! She turned and walked straight through the kitchen to the dining-room, and rang the telephone bell.

CHAPTER VII

MARY'S STRANGE SECRET

"PLEASE give me Pine Landing," said Mary when Central answered the telephone. "Yes, this is the Red Top Ranch. Yes. Please tell Mr. Merwin when he comes to call up his own house and speak to Miss Mary Lloyd before he calls up the sheriff. Yes!—before he calls—the—sheriff." She rang off, turned round and ran out of the house.

It was very still as she went through the kitchen. She knew that they must have heard her at the telephone. She was not exactly afraid, but she felt safer out of doors and in the saddle. She untied Fireball, got on her back and rode round the kitchen wing under the cook's window.

"Mrs. Malley!" she called. No answer. "Mrs. Malley answer me! I heard your son talking. I am going to help him if I can."

Mrs. Malley's tear-stained face appeared at the window.

"Your uncle told you to water your horse. What are you doing in the house?" she said sullenly.

"Don't speak to me like that!" answered Mary. "I tell you I am going to help you. Tell your son to come to the window."

Mrs. Malley withdrew. All was silent. After a minute or two, Mary called:

"Mr. Malley! I hope you are not afraid of a little girl. If you are, I believe you ought to be in jail."

Quick as a flash the young man was leaning out of the window. He was sunburned and rather nice looking. On his face was a black stubbly growth of beard.

"How do you do, miss. You are a game one, I must confess," he said.

"Your mother deceived my uncle about the telephone," said Mary, "but I will overlook that if you will promise to go right away from this house."

"Sure! I'll clear out as quick as I can get the chance. They're after me for something I did n't do though."

"I understand that," said Mary. "But you must think quick. What do you want to do?"

"I want to stay hid here in my mammy's room till everybody's asleep to-night. Then I'll make off if she'll give me some money to help me when I strike a railroad."

"He knows I can't ask for my money out of time," said his mother, her face appearing over

his shoulder. "I told Mrs. Merwin to keep my money for me till interest day. It's all in her bank in Laramie."

"I have twelve dollars," said Mary. "Will that be any help to you?"

The young man looked astonished.

"You bet it will! I'll send it back to you as soon as I get a job."

"Very well. I'll give you my address at home. Mrs. Malley, please go to my top bureau drawer in my room and get my pocket-book for me, and bring it here."

Mrs. Malley obeyed. At the kitchen door, she handed the pocket-book to the girl in the saddle. Mary gave her the money.

"God will bless you for this, Mary Lloyd," said Mrs. Malley solemnly.

"Tell your son to keep very quiet till to-night," said Mary. "I won't say a word, and nobody ever goes up into your room. You can give him his food up there."

"No danger but he'll keep quiet enough." Mrs. Malley disappeared into the house.

Mary turned Fireball about, and was walking her in the direction of the river when she was surprised to see her uncle galloping towards home. She rode to meet him with a strange, almost guilty feeling in her heart. Her intuition told her that she was doing right, yet she felt confused

at taking such a responsibility, and her conscience kept pricking her to tell her uncle all about it. But she did not dare do that.

"I decided to come back again and see if our telephone really is out of order," he said. "I don't like the way Poll Malley acted."

Mary said nothing. She had not believed that the telephone was out of order when the cook first said so, but it had taken a little longer for the doubt to enter her uncle's mind. She did not go into the house with him. She would not show too much interest. He came out presently.

"Just as I thought!" he said. "Job Malley is the name of the other fellow that the sheriff's after. He describes him as about six feet tall, young, with a short, black beard. You have n't seen any one like that hanging round here, have you?" He smiled, meaning a joke.

Mary turned pale.

"There, dearie, don't be frightened. But I should n't wonder if Mrs. Malley knows more than she pretends. I guess I'll get my guns. The sheriff and a posse of four are on their way out from Laramie. They will be here to dinner. I must tell Mrs. Malley to get 'em up a good one. They 'phoned from the office that they are going to beat up our woods and over the mountain tonight and want some of us to help them. Why, Mary, dear child, you are trembling all over.

Come, let uncle lift you down. Nothing shall hurt you, darling."

"I am not afraid," said Mary. "No, thank you, I guess I'll stay on Fireball. I will ride up towards the big gate and meet Aunt Kate when I see her coming."

"You'll see some tall broncho hauling, as Bud brings in the buckskin," warned her uncle.

"Well, then I'll look in the other direction." Mary put up her chin and trotted away.

Her uncle looked after her for a moment.

"Women are queer kittle-cattle,—even kid women!" he said to himself. Then he went into the kitchen, where Mrs. Malley was peeling potatoes for dinner.

"Cook, there will be at least five extra men here for dinner, the sheriff and his posse. Get them up a good dinner. I'll go out and wring some roosters' necks for you."

"Yes, sir. All right."

"Look here. The telephone is working perfectly well. The other jail-breaker's name is Job Malley."

"Is it?" Her face was impassive as usual.

"What made you tell me the phone was out of order? Is Job Malley any kin to you?"

"The telephone would n't work for me. It hardly ever will. Besides, I was afraid my bread would burn."

Mr. Merwin turned and went out of the house.

Upstairs Job Malley sat on the floor, behind the calico curtain that hid the corner where his mother hung her dresses. He was sitting there when the sound of the sheriff's arrival came, and the noise of the men bringing the buckskin to the corral. He crouched as nearly motionless as possible, while the good smells of his mother's cookery reached him. During the silence that followed the arrival, he knew that his pursuers were eating their dinner in the dining-room. It was nearly three o'clock before his mother had a chance to bring him any food. He devoured it eagerly, not daring to whisper a word.

Mary Lloyd ate no dinner that noon, and scarcely any supper at night when she sat down with her aunt and cousins at the table. Her uncle was away with the sheriff and his posse looking for Malley and Nottinger.

"What ails you, Mary?" asked Aunt Kate.

"Any Indians been scaring you?" asked Bert.

"Not one," replied Mary.

"You look like a spook, all white about the gills," said Charlie.

"Are spooks white about the gills?" retorted Mary, trying to speak gaily. "That must be what ails me, Auntie."

Her aunt looked at her shrewdly, but said nothing. She saw that the little girl had some-

thing on her mind, but supposed it was nothing more than her morning's excitement over the buckskin broncho.

Mary went early to her room, but lay wide awake listening, listening. It was after midnight before her uncle and Bud Todd returned. She was greatly relieved that the sheriff and his men were not with them. She went to the front stairs in her wrapper and bed shoes when she heard her uncle go to his room. She crept softly down. His door was ajar. The light shone within. Aunt Kate was sitting up in bed.

"We got Nottinger all right," Mary heard her uncle say. "He was in that tumble-down cabin up the creek where old man Cox used to hang out. Malley got away."

"I'm glad of it!" said Aunt Kate. "I've been talking to cook as you asked me to, and though I could n't get much out of her, I suspect he may be some relation of her dead husband."

"But suppose he shot and killed a man?"

"Well, I guess his conscience will trouble him enough if he did. I wish Rap Nottinger had got away too. He used to work for my uncle up in the Big Horn country."

"That settles it," said Uncle Billy, and closed the door.

Somehow Mary felt much relieved for what she was about to do because Aunt Kate said she

was glad that Malley had got away. She at least would not condemn her. When the house grew quiet at last, and she knew that the family must all be asleep, Mary went down through the house and up the kitchen stair.

"Mrs. Malley!" she whispered at the head of the stair.

"Yes," came a whisper back in the darkness.

"Your boy can come now. You can let him out of the kitchen door and lock it after him. And, Mrs. Malley ——"

"Yes."

"Fireball is in the corral. Tell him an old bridle is hanging just inside the stable door next the corral on that side. If he wants to, he can ride her till daylight, and then turn her loose. She will come home."

"All right."

"Thank you miss." The young man had crept across the floor on all fours. His face was on a level with Mary's as she stood on one of the upper steps.

"You will get your twelve dollars back from me through my mother," said Job Malley.

"All right. Are you ready? Well, come."

Mary heard the sound of a kiss as Job bade his mother good-bye. Then Mrs. Malley came downstairs without her shoes, her son followed with his shoes in his hands. A moment later he was

out in the cool, dark night, free. Mrs. Malley locked the door, and hurried to her own room. Mary stole back to hers and peeped through the shutters. She could see the figure of the man in the corral. Breathlessly she waited, hoping, fearing, longing to see him go softly away on Fireball, certain that the mare would return. But he disappeared and she went to her bed.

Job saw that the mare was a thoroughbred; he dared not risk borrowing a horse of her value, even with Mary's permission. He might be seen and accused of stealing the mare. There was another horse all alone in the other corral, back of the barn, a little broncho, of no great value, a horse with skinned places on his hide and a tired droop of his head. Malley got the bridle on him, not without difficulty, and led him down to the shallows, over to the island and a little way up the bank. Then he got on his back, or tried to get on. The outlaw took the bit in his mouth, he plunged and reared, and bucked and rolled. He shook off his would-be rider; he shook the broken bridle over his head and made away across the wire-fenced meadow into the night. Malley sat still on the river bank with a badly sprained ankle. Only for a moment, then he got up and tried to limp away. It was no use. The foot was swelling fast. He crawled to the stream and

got it into the cold water. That made it feel better; he staggered on dragging it along, but soon saw that this was hopeless. He crawled into the roofless enclosure of logs, the one-roomed log cabin now filled with blossoming wild roses, that had been William Merwin's home when he took up his first section of government land, twenty years before.

As soon as daylight came Mary was out at the corral. Fireball was still there. She whinnied to greet her young mistress and came and put her nose through the fence.

"Poor man! I suppose he was afraid you would whinny and wake up the people," said Mary. She sighed as she thought of her twelve dollars, and patted Fireball's nose. The truth was, she had been longing to ask Aunt Kate if she would sell Fireball to her. She had dreamed of asking her if twelve dollars would not do for a first payment and if she could write home and ask her father's consent to the purchase. She knew that the mare was worth several hundred dollars; but the value of money was not clear in Mary's mind. She had never had so much as twelve dollars of her own at one time before in her life. This was put in her purse when she left home and she had had no occasion to spend it.

Fireball whinnied again. Mary climbed up on the fence to pat her better. Now she could

see into the small corral. The buckskin broncho was gone. She understood at once.

"Poor man! He thought he had better borrow the outlaw! I do hope that broncho has n't killed Job Malley!"

She climbed down and went and inspected the ground. The broncho's tracks led into the river. Mary crossed the bridge to the island. Off towards the Old Channel she saw the buckskin peacefully feeding. She did not dare to go in his direction, so she went up the bank past little Nelly's resting place, as far as the ruined cabin.

She saw how the wild roses had begun to come into bloom since last she passed this way and thought how sweet they looked and smelled. She would pick a bouquet for the breakfast table. So she scrambled over a fallen log and was just going to jump down beside the tangle within when she saw the black-bearded young face with anxious dark eyes looking up into her own.

"Oh!" cried Mary, and caught at the old door post for support. "Mercy, how you scared me!" Then she gave him a smile.

"You scared me first good and plenty," Job Malley smiled back. "I've broke my foot, I guess. I can't get away. Luck seems to be dead against me."

"Don't be discouraged," said Mary. "If you deserve to get away, you will. You do deserve

to, don't you?" She looked sweetly down at him.

"I ain't done no wrong to nobody, if that's what you mean," said Malley. "I'd take my Bible oath on that, sissy."

"Well," said Mary, "you stay here and I'll bring you your food till we see what is going to happen. Something nice must happen for you if you deserve it."

"It'll be a pleasant change from so far since I struck Wyoming," said Malley, grimly. "They took me up as I was footing it over from Colorado to see my mammy and landed me in Laramie jail."

Malley remained hid in the old cabin. It was a wonder that neither Bert nor Charlie discovered him, but they both went into Laramie with their father the first day he was there. On the second, as it chanced, neither their work nor play took them in the direction of the old cabin. It was a place where the hired men never had occasion to go. Unless they had been specially searching for him, Malley might have lain concealed there for a long time.

Mary had little difficulty in carrying food to him. She was in the habit of roaming about the place, feeding hens, carrying pans of Indian meal to young chickens, or playing at trout-fishing; so that nobody noticed her when she went

over to the island with the basket or pan that Mrs. Malley prepared. The cook grew thin with worry. She dared not go near her boy for fear of rousing question at such a change from her usual habits as a stroll across to the island. Bud Todd and Donnelly, on horseback, drove the buckskin back into the corral, supposing that of course he had jumped the fence.

Mrs. Merwin noticed the pallor of Mary's face and felt certain that she was acquainted with the Malley for whom the sheriff and his men were still searching.

Those days seemed very long to Mary. Her strange secret weighed heavily on her mind.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NEW HIRED MAN

Two days went by. Every time Mary looked at her uncle she felt as if the secret would choke her; she could not meet his glance. And he who was always kind, seeing that she was in some sort of trouble, was more tender towards her than ever, so that Mary began to love him with one of those affections which last a lifetime and are our dearest bonds on this earth where we dwell.

Mary was sitting on the sofa, the second evening, watching her uncle as he read his Laramie newspaper that Fred had brought from the rural mail box.

"Jove, Kitty! Listen to this!" Mr. Merwin exclaimed to his wife; and read aloud:

"We are enabled to announce that Job Malley who escaped from jail with Rap Nottinger the day of Nottinger's escape and recapture, deserved the liberty he grabbed by the throat and wrested from fate on that occasion, evading the bloodhounds of the law."

"That's the sheriff and you," interpreted Aunt Kate with a smile.

Uncle Billy puffed his lips, then read on, not noticing the little figure tense and alert on the sofa across the room. Mary listened, her heart thumping wildly:

"Malley is the living image of Pad Dickey, the fellow the Denver sheriff telegraphs to the authorities that he has captured; so Malley, wherever he is hiding goes scot free of the crime that Dickey confesses, for Dickey is the murderer of Bone Billgus."

"The murderer!" exclaimed Aunt Kate.

"Oh! oh!" wailed Mary. She flung herself across the sitting-room, cast herself on her Uncle Billy's broad breast, her arms about his neck, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"What on earth is the matter?" cried her aunt. Uncle Billy soothed and petted her in silence until she lifted her face and said between tears and smiles:

"Job Malley is hid out in your old cabin. I knew he did n't hurt anybody."

"In my old cabin! Well, I'll be—jiggered!" Her uncle held her out on his knee and gazed at her in amazement. "What sort of a viper is this I am cherishing in my bosom?" He shook her a little, but his voice was so gentle and his eyes so full of affection that Mary took courage and

told the whole story. He listened in silence, but her aunt kept asking questions.

When Mary had finished, Uncle Billy repeated thoughtfully:

“Well, I’ll be jiggered!” He drew Mary’s head down on his shoulder and sat thinking for a few minutes. His wife sat looking at him with understanding, her sewing neglected in her lap. It was she who spoke first:

“If you do, Billy Merwin, you’ll just have to build on another room to the bunk-house for Bud Todd. He is crowded enough already with Jim and Donnelly both in that room.”

“It’s a big room, ma’am. I don’t mind if you do get up a wireless on my thinking machine, and tap my secret thoughts. You need n’t look so smart, ma’am. I always did admire you more than anybody I know, unless it is my girl here.” He stood Mary up on the floor, shook her, smiled at her, and showed his teeth. “I’m a big ogre,” he said, “I ought to eat you alive, miss, for harboring suspected criminals and trying to condone felony. Well, what do you say to my hiring Job Malley to stay and work for us here at the ranch?”

“Oh, won’t that make his mother happy!”

Uncle Billy picked up the newspaper. “Come, let’s give her this,” he said.

“Yes, and let’s get a lantern so that Job can

see where to walk in the bushes," said Mary. "We will go out to the old cabin and round up her progidle son."

"When you say 'round up her progidle son' so sweetly I'd give you half my kingdom, if you wanted it," said Uncle Billy. "Come along and get the lantern, you jail-breaking little horse-thief, you!"

When Malley heard them and saw the light approaching, he groaned, feeling that now he would be taken back to the jail.

Mary called to him,—

"Don't be scared. You are all right! It is in the newspaper that you are all right. Uncle Billy wants you to be our hired man."

Malley climbed up and looked over the wall of the roofless cabin.

"Is it so, honest?" he asked as Mr. Merwin drew near.

"It is true, Malley," Mr. Merwin answered gravely. "You are a free man. I guess we can find plenty of hard work for you when your foot gets all right if you want to stay on with your mother here at the ranch."

"Mother is a good cook," said Malley simply. He climbed out then, and hobbled towards the house, helped by his new employer. At the bridge, Mrs. Malley met them.

"My son, oh, my son!" she cried. She came

up to her boy and put her arms around his neck. Mary and Uncle Billy hurried away, hand in hand, to the house. When Mary was alone in her room that night, Mrs. Malley came and brought back her twelve dollars.

"Job says to thank you just as much as if he had used it," she said.

"Tell him that 's all right," said Mary.

Job Malley's foot got well rapidly in his mother's good care. He was useful indoors and out, hobbling about on the crutch he made of a cottonwood pole. The other hired men never tired of joking him about his effort to ride the buckskin broncho; they were always offering to bring the outlaw for Malley to take a ride.

Mary was out near the old cabin after breakfast one morning, with the dogs at her heels as usual, when Job Malley came limping up the river bank with his fishing tackle, and began whipping the stream for a big gamey trout that had just darted into view. He was not long landing him. When the trout was added to his string, Mary went down to the bank and proposed a plan that had come into her pitying heart as she saw how lame Job was.

"Does n't it hurt your foot to walk?" she asked him. "Don't you want to just sit quietly down on the grass and let me go and get a book and read to you while you are fishing?"

Job kept a solemn face, though his black eyes twinkled.

“Well, the trout would like to hear you read, first rate,” he said.

“Oh, very well! If you don’t wish to hear me ——”

“Well, you see, I ’m ——” Just then a fine brook trout took the fly. Job forgot everything else in a lively battle to land him. As he lost his fish he became aware of a small stern person standing near. “Well, you see I ’m not much on book-learning myself,” said Job. He was wishing with all his heart that Mary would go away. She was disturbing the fish.

Mary, indignant, said not a word, but walked away towards the house. She thought that she had done so much for Job Malley that he really might have accepted her offer to entertain him. She did not know that there are few such fishermen on earth as her uncle, who would sit on the bank near the bunk-house in the dusk of evening and chat with her while he reeled in trout enough for breakfast. She took the path to the narrow plank over the inlet on her way to the bridge. In her vexation she did not walk carefully, or perhaps it was because the board was slippery from dew. At all events, Mary suddenly found herself floundering in two feet of water. She had stepped off the plank. Tears of anger were

in her eyes as she scrambled out to the bank.

Shep and the hounds were trotting on unconcernedly ahead.

She crossed the big bridge and as she left it she met her uncle from whom sympathy might have been expected. Instead he said:

“Well, you look like a drowned rat. Been swimming all by your lonesome?”

Mary made no answer but ran past him and into the house by the back door. As she went through the sitting-room on her way to the stair, her aunt said:

“For goodness sake Mary, you are dripping on the rugs! What has happened to you?”

“The rugs first, not me! I might have been drowned!” thought Mary bitterly, as she fled without answering to her own room. As she changed to dry things and hung her wet clothes over the towel rack, she cried angrily, wishing she were at home. When she went down-stairs again, her wet shoes in her hand to dry them in the sun, she tiptoed so that her aunt should not hear her. She went softly around the corner of the house and came face to face with Charlie, who was eagerly waiting for her. He spoke in a very low voice:

“Father told me you went swimming all alone,” he said. “Why did n’t you tell me? I’d have taken you over to the Old Channel.”

Mary smiled; she could not help it. Charlie's comradeship was welcome in her sad mood.

"I did n't think of it," she whispered, not telling him that her bath was unexpected.

"Well, I'll take you over there some other time," said Charlie. "Let's go up river and sing. Job Malley is up there fishing and it will make him mad."

Here was a comrade indeed! Mary laughed.

"I always sing when the new hired men go fishing," Charlie went on. "It makes 'em half crazy to have the trout disturbed. Bud Todd is the only one that ever ducked me. Malley won't dare, on account of you. Will you come?"

"Yes, of course I'll come," said Mary heartily. She and Charlie went demurely out, followed by the dogs. Mary felt the wrathful pleasure of revenge as she and Charlie strolled up the bank singing together:

"The star-spangled banner, oh, long may it wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!"

Charlie had reckoned wrongly on Job's patience under affliction. The fisherman paid no attention to them until they were close upon him. Then he turned, lunged at Charlie, and tried to grapple him with such evident intention to duck him that he and Mary ran away as fast as they could go. At a short distance, fenced in, was a

haystack where the red top grass of the island meadow had been stored for the winter feeding of cattle. It took but a short time for the children to reach this redoubt. They stormed the castle, climbed the fence, then the boy aiding the girl, scrambled to the top of the stack and sat there panting in triumphant retreat.

Mary looked at Charlie with so much admiration for his courage that he was moved to propose sliding down the haystack. Now, this was one of the few things for which the Red Top boys had every one been punished. The slide down a haystack meant tearing off its carefully arranged outside layers, uncovering it to rain and wind, and exposing to the weather tons of hay needed for the cattle when snow lay deep on the ground. But Charlie had started leading his willing cousin into mischief, and nothing could stop him now. He slid down several times himself, until he had made a good slide.

"Come on, Mary!" he cried then, and held out his hand to her.

Mary came. It was great fun, that quick precipitous slide to the ground and the soft pile of loosened hay. Then came the scramble to the top and the slide down again. Over and over again the two children climbed up and slid down until the great stack was in a wildly disordered state.

Job Malley came hobbling to them, his string of trout over his shoulder.

"You 'll catch it, kids!" he called. Mary pretended not to see him. Charlie put out his tongue. Just then in the distance they saw Mr. Merwin coming. He was on Nibs, riding leisurely down beside the stream after an inspection of the dam. The children slid quickly to the ground.

"Come, we must hide!" Charlie seized Mary's arm and dragged her into an alder thicket. "Dad always has a fit over his haystacks."

"Job Malley will tell him we slid the hay down," whispered Mary.

"Hush-sh!" was Charlie's only reply.

Mr. Merwin galloped up on Nibs. His remarks at the condition of the haystack were strong and to the point.

"Where are those confounded boys, Malley?" he inquired.

Mary trembled; she expected to hear Job tell her uncle that she had helped do this thing. She expected to see a look of anger at herself cross his face.

"I ain't seen any boys," replied Malley, truthfully enough, as he had seen only one boy.

"I saw somebody on top of the stack not two minutes ago!" cried the master of the ranch.

"Well, can't a poor lame fellow like me get up

and slide down a haystack a few times to amuse me if I'll turn in and fix it up again as good as it was before?" said Malley.

Mr. Merwin stared at his new hired man for an instant. Then his amazement cooled in amused understanding of the situation. Perhaps he saw the flutter of a little pink dress in the alders.

"Well, Job, you choose very strange ways to amuse yourself," he said slowly at last. "But I suppose you feel bound to stick to your friends. I'll go and get two pitchforks," and he rode away.

Mary and Charlie emerged from the thicket and darted over to the concealment of the cottonwoods by the stream. When Nibs came back with his rider and the pitchforks, the children were safe in the shelter of the old cabin. There they remained until the stack had been put in order again and Mr. Merwin and Malley had gone.

"Dad smells a mouse about the stack. We better not go to the house for dinner until he has had time to get done eating," Charlie advised as he waded about with his shoes on in the cold shallows of the inlet, and Mary stood admiring him on the shore.

"I'm so hungry," pleaded Mary.

Just then Job Malley appeared.

"I've been looking over that old cabin," he

said to Mary, as if nothing had happened. "I can fix up a roof of boughs for it, and I can transplant the wild roses to outside for you, and put in a floor of poles chinked with grass and make a grand play-house for you,—if you'd like it?"

"Oh, Job!" cried Mary. "That would be perfectly splendid! I wonder if my uncle would mind."

"I asked him," said Job. "He said to go ahead if it would please you."

"Charlie," said Mary suddenly, "I'm going into the house to have my dinner with your father. I'm going to tell him I'm sorry!"

"All right for you," said Charlie. "That's just like a girl!" He waded gloomily off into the shallows of the river and Mary walked slowly towards the house, accommodating her footsteps to the slow pace of limping Job Malley.

CHAPTER IX

ELIZABETH COMES

IN a few days the old cabin was transformed into the most delightful playhouse that you can imagine.

Malley grubbed out the wild rose-bushes with such care that their roots came with them and so much earth that they went on blooming gaily on either side of the path which led up to Mary's lodge. He roofed it over with pine boughs, and made the floor of poles, chinked with dried sweet grass.

Aunt Kate contributed three breadths of rag carpet, woven hit-or-miss; this covered the middle of the floor. Uncle Billy fitted in some old window frames from the bunk-house at the one window; over its glassless panes Mary hung a frilled curtain of pink and white muslin.

On the afternoon that Mary moved in, no less than eight people crossed the bridge and went up the island carrying things for the log playhouse. Uncle Billy led the way loaded with

soap-boxes for camp-stools. Fred carried a canvas cot which was to be Mary's sofa; Bert, red cushions stuffed with sweet clover hay. Charlie shouldered the basket of chipped and cracked dishes Aunt Kate had sorted out from the pantry and china closet. Job Malley had an armful of boards; he intended to nail these fast to the four poles driven into the ground in the cabin, to form an immovable table.

Aunt Kate had a little bamboo shelf and half a dozen story books, while Mary carried something in a basket carefully covered with a napkin, and the cook followed carrying a large glass pitcher.

It was surprising how cosy the playhouse looked, when everybody had been busy for half an hour.

"I declare!" said Uncle Billy, sitting down on the table as Job Malley finished it. "I declare, this seems like home. I lived here alone, or with one hired man, for seven years when I first came out to Wyoming."

"Would n't it be nice if it was now, so I could keep house for you?" said Mary, from the depths of the barrel armchair Job had made for her the day before.

"Yes, that would be all right," he replied. "Do you happen to have anything to eat in that pantry of yours?" He looked at the shelves

where Charlie had just been helping Mary arrange her dishes. She rose smiling and uncovered the basket she had brought.

"Old Mother Hubbard has nothing in her cupboard, but how will this do?" she inquired, putting on the table beside the cook's pitcher of iced lemonade a big molasses layer cake covered with chocolate icing.

"Whoop!" yelled Charlie suddenly.

"Mercy!" His mother put her fingers in her ears.

"Those are my sentiments too, thank you," said Uncle Billy.

Mary cut the big cake Mrs. Malley had made for her housewarming and passed it around, a happy hostess, while everybody ate and drank.

This was the beginning of many pleasant hours at the log house. Mary liked to go up there to write her letters home. She was there finishing a letter to Edith just before sunset one afternoon when Charlie came along the riverbank with a rainbow trout he had caught a little way up stream.

"Hello, Mary!" he said, appearing in the doorway. "Where's the kitchen to this residence? Have you got such a thing as a frying-pan?"

As Mary looked up from her letter he came in.



At the log house

"Can I have this?" Charlie took from a shelf a square tin box half full of oat-meal crackers, and answered his own question by pouring the crackers on the table and going out of doors with the box.

Mary jumped up.

"Why, Charlie Merwin, how dare you come and rob my house before my face and eyes!" she exclaimed, following him out of doors.

"I thought I could start you up," he said, putting his trout down on the grass, and proceeding to break the tin box open with a stone. "This will make a fine frying-pan. Squaw, go pick up sticks for a fire. Big injun's going to clean this fish for a fry."

"Oh, Charlie, won't that be fun! A real camp-fire! We'll cook our supper. I've got some apples for dessert."

She flew over to the nearest thicket and returned with some twigs.

"Call those firewood!" growled Charlie, and putting his trout up in the fork of a cottonwood tree, he went over to the thicket himself, Mary trotting beside him. When they came back with their arms full of good-sized sticks, both fish and pan had disappeared. The sun had gone down, and the sky was gay with color, but no one was to be seen.

"Bert!" called Mary. "Where are you?"

A rustling sound in the cottonwood tree answered. They looked upward.

"Come down with my things, young un, or you'll wish you had!" threatened Charlie.

"You're invited to supper, Bertie," coaxed Mary.

A shower of twigs and leaves was the only reply.

"Monkey! Stay up your tree! I can catch plenty more trout." Charlie began laying the dry wood up in a zig-zag pile. When Mary went into the cabin to get a match for him there were none to be found.

"I thought I had some matches," she said indignantly. "Bert's taken them too. All right for you, mister!" She stamped her foot and addressed the dark object high among the branches. "Charlie and I will just go into the house, and you can stay out here and cook your own supper all alone."

They strolled slowly away. Bert promptly slid down to the ground and lighted the fire. It roared up gaily in the deepening dusk, and looking back from the shadows of the alders they saw him calmly cleaning the fish.

"Good job," said Charlie. "I'll bet you have n't got any salt or bacon?"

"No."

"I'll sneak for the kitchen and make a haul

from Ma'am Malley, and get back by the time he gets it done, and then we'll see!" Charlie hurried away.

Mary tip-toed up behind Bert. The leaping tongues of fire, the long shadows on the grass, were like a scene in a fairy pantomime. Suddenly over in the river came a thumping muffled sound, and Bert dropped the fish and bounded over to the river-bank, Mary at his heels. A black, thick back showed in the deeper water, disappeared, showed again, and was off down stream, Bert rushing away through the thickets in pursuit. Mary went back to the fire. She threw on more sticks, and until Charlie came back stood watching the blaze leaping up with the delight that only an outdoor fire can give.

"How did you get rid of Bert?" asked Charlie, as he finished cleaning the fish and put it with some bits of bacon on his cracker-tin frying-pan.

"A fat, dark thing flapped by in the river—" began Mary.

"Whew!" whistled Charlie.

"And Bert dropped everything and ran,—"
she went on, "and I—" Then she stopped, for with a bound bigger than Bert's Charlie was off and away down the river bank, and she was left with the trout sizzling on the coals of the fire. She took a long stick for a fork and turned it

over when it began to brown. She ran into the cabin and brought out her apples and crackers, but no boys appeared. Instead she heard from across the river the voice of her uncle shouting:

"Mary, Mary! Is that you over there?"

"Yes, Uncle Billy."

"Are the boys there?"

"No-o!"

"What under the sun!" She heard a crash through the bushes, then a splash in the shallows, and Uncle Billy, half a dozen trout on his string and in the tall rubber boots he wore when fishing, came wading across to her.

"Well, you are an enterprising young lady, starting up camp-fire here all alone!" he exclaimed. "And supper, too, I declare! Well, that fish of yours looks good."

"Sit down there," commanded Mary, pulling the frying-pan out of the fire with her long stick. "Now, promise not to go running off without a word, and I'll tell you all about it. You're invited to supper. Promise!"

"I promise." He dropped on the grass and picked up a fresh twig. "Pass the fish, please."

Mary poked the pan along the grass towards him, gave him a cracker, and told him.

"Now, what made those boys run off from such lovely fish as this?" she asked, with her mouth full.

"A beaver," answered Uncle Billy. "You can't blame them, Mary. They won't catch him, but they'll be trying to for the next hour. It was n't just the right way to run off from a lady's supper table."

"I don't care," said Mary, "as long as you have come, Uncle Billy. And I am glad I saw a real beaver. It will be lovely to finish up my letter to Edith to-morrow."

It was during the first week of August that Mary had a great surprise. A horse and buggy turned in at the big gate one afternoon as she sat stringing beads in the porch with her aunt. They thought at first that it was a friend of Mrs. Merwin's from Laramie, but as the buggy crossed the bridge of the big ditch, Mrs. Merwin said:

"I never saw those people before."

"Elizabeth! and her father!" exclaimed Mary, springing to her feet. Her beads dropped from her lap to the floor. Her thimble rolled off the edge of the porch to the ground. "It's the girl who was on the train to Chicago. See! she's all in white, with white shoes!"

"Senator Wright! Dear, dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Merwin, rising. "I wonder why he did n't telephone from town!"

The livery horse from Laramie drew up in front of the house.

"How do you do!" called Elizabeth from the

buggy. She looked Mary over with a smile at her worn shoes and the old gingham frock she happened to be wearing.

"Hello!" replied Mary in a surprised voice. Then more politely, "How do you do! Mr. Wright, let me present you to my aunt, Mrs. Merwin."

He got out, and shook hands, while Elizabeth sat still, looking Mary over.

"How did you happen to come, Elizabeth?" asked Mary, standing by the buggy wheel.

"Oh, I'm just travelling with my father," returned Elizabeth.

"My husband will be delighted to see you," Mrs. Merwin was saying to Mr. Wright. "I'll have your horse taken around to the stable at once."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Merwin," he said. "I hope you got my message? I telephoned from Laramie when I decided to get off there instead of going on to Rawlins."

"Our wire may be out of order. I did n't get your message. But never mind; it is all right. We're very glad to see you. Won't you get out, my dear?" Mrs. Merwin spoke to Elizabeth; then to Mary, who was patting the horse,—“Run and find your uncle, Mary.”

"Father, will you turn the wheel, please, so I won't get my dress dusty," said Elizabeth.

She stepped daintily out of the carriage, while Mary, trying not to smile, gave the horse one more pat, and vanished around the corner of the house, laughing as soon as she was out of hearing.

"Elizabeth Wright is here, and she's putting on airs, and Aunt Kate wants you to come quick!" said Mary, rushing around the corner of the tool-house where her uncle sat on a log in the shade mending something that belonged to his mowing machine.

He did not stir.

"Can't your aunt make her stop putting on airs without my help?" he asked.

Mary laughed.

"I mean Aunt Kate wants you to come because the Senator did n't go to Rawlins and telephoned from Laramie, but the wires got crossed."

"Well, I should say your wires seem to be crossed too! What's all this about the Senator and putting on airs?"

"Oh Uncle Billy, you're so funny! Now, listen, little boy!" She shook her finger at him. "Miss Elizabeth Wright, of Chicago, has brought her father out to Wyoming. She has on white shoes and she's used to travelling, and they're on the front porch with Aunt Kate, and Auntie wants you to come and see about the horse."

Uncle Billy went on with his mending.

"Your friend Bud is over there by the mow, unloading hay. Go and tell him to bring the horse around," he said. "Then you go and get the company into the parlor and shut the door."

"What for?" asked Mary.

"Come here and I'll tell you."

Mary came close. He whispered in her ear with a great show of secrecy:

"Your aunt would never forgive me if Senator Wright should see me in these blue overalls. I want to sneak through the sitting-room to my room and make myself presentable."

"You ought to have seen Elizabeth look at my old frock!" laughed Mary. "Aunt Kate said for you to come."

"There it is again! A married man has to mind his wife."

Mary laughed.

"Stop laughing, child; it's a serious matter. Go and tell your friend Bud to get your friend Elizabeth's horse."

"There he goes!" she answered. For Bud had seen the arrival, and was already on his way towards the front of the house. They saw Bud go and lead the horse around and take him out of the buggy; then Aunt Kate's voice was heard calling from the kitchen door.

"Billy! Billy!"

"William! Oh, William!" A moment later

Aunt Kate came around the corner of the tool-house. "What on earth are you two doing here?" she exclaimed.

"Mary, did n't you tell your uncle that Senator Wright is here?"

Uncle Billy sprang to his feet, pretending to be astonished.

"Mary! why did n't you tell me that before?" He seized her and swung her up over his shoulder, while she laughed so that she could not answer Aunt Kate.

"You are both too silly to live," said Aunt Kate. "William Merwin! You've got on those dreadful old overalls again! Don't for mercy sake, let Mr. Wright see you looking like that."

"What did I tell you, Mary?" Uncle Billy stood Mary on the ground again and took her hand and faced Aunt Kate. "Now, we'll both be good children, mamma," he promised, "if you will go and shut the Senator up tight in the parlor while I put on my best white dress and my white shoes and stockings!"

Mrs. Merwin could not help smiling, as she went to see that the coast was clear.

Elizabeth was sitting primly on the sofa in the parlor when Mary came in with her uncle. She had waited in the sitting-room while he made himself presentable. He looked very nice in his

blue flannels when he came into the room, and welcomed the newcomers.

Senator Wright explained that he had come out to Wyoming to make a tour of the new copper country, and had decided to get off the train at Laramie and consult Mr. Merwin about the whole region, before going westward.

"I'll tell you a better scheme than that," said Mr. Merwin. "Just stay here a few days until I get my haying done, then I'll hitch up a camping outfit and take you over the range myself. I've been wanting to take a look over in the North Platte country for some time."

"Capital idea! I could n't ask for anything better," replied Mr. Wright cordially.

Mary slipped across the room, sat down on the sofa beside her uncle, and put her hand into his. He squeezed it as much as to say, "I'll see," which as children know is almost the same as saying, "Yes, you may go."

"Now, father!" said Elizabeth from the piano stool where she was sitting. "You know I can't bear camping out."

"You don't know anything about it, Bess," said her father.

"I know you sleep out of doors and wear old clothes and that is all I care to know," said Elizabeth. "I want my trunk with my dresses."

"We'll telephone and get your trunk," said

Mr. Merwin, "and you can stay here and wear your pretty dresses all you please while your father and I go over the range."

"Yes," said Mrs. Merwin. "You can keep me company."

"Thank you; I should like that very much," said Elizabeth. She glanced at Mary's old gingham frock again. But Mary did not care. Her mind was full of the coming pleasure of going camping with her Uncle Billy.

"Don't you want to come out and see the ducks and chickens," invited Mary, crossing the room to the newcomer.

Elizabeth looked surprised.

"I don't care much about such things," she said.

"Well, then, come and see the wild broncho we caught two or three weeks ago," said Mary. "He's in the corral now. We keep him there."

Elizabeth looked more surprised, but she rose and the two went out together through the dining-room. Mary got some lumps of sugar from the pantry and carried them out on a pan to the corral. In one corner stood the buckskin. When they went up to the fence on that side he ran across to the other side. He looked no worse for his troubles now. Elizabeth was very much interested when Mary told her how he had been caught.

"I feed him sugar every day to comfort him," said Mary.

They tried to coax the broncho, but he would not come near them. So they put the pan through the fence on the ground. When they were at a safe distance he came and nosed it and turned over the sugar and,—left it. Mary went into the stable and got a tin of oats and poured them on the pan with the sugar. When the buckskin came back and found the oats he ate oats, sugar and all, then put up his head and looked inquiringly at the girls.

Bud came by. "Well, Miss Mary, are you still making love to that outlaw?" he asked. "I reckon I'll have to get you a megaphone so you can whisper to that bronk from a safe distance."

Bud went on to his work and Mary took Elizabeth over on the island to see Fireball and up to the log play-house.

They were by the corral again just before sunset while Mr. Wright was out too, looking about the place with Mr. Merwin, when Charlie came with several letters in his hand and gave them to his father.

"Excuse me," said Mr. Merwin to the visitors. "Here's one from the Elks at Cheyenne. Let's see what they want." He read aloud the letter from the Secretary of the Elks saying that they were going to hold a fair in Cheyenne and re-

questing Mr. Merwin to contribute something for the charitable purposes of the Association. "Look here, Bud," he called to Bud Todd. "What do you say to sending your buckskin broncho to the Elks for their fair? You roped him. He's yours."

Bud came over to the group with a smiling face.

"It would be a good joke on 'em to contribute that bronk as a saddle-horse," he said. "My limping Betsy! Every time I try to back him, he tries to break my neck."

"Does the horse buck?" inquired Senator Wright.

"Well, sir, I dunno as you could use such a polite word as buck for the way he humps himself and swaps ends," replied Bud. "I've been trying to get onto that bubble of sulphur broth for a couple of weeks now, ever since we roped him. I'm going to try him again, soon as I get through what I'm at. The little girls there better get up on to the carriage-house out of harm's way!" He gave Mary a humorous glance, which she returned, with a solemn look. It was a point of difference between her and Bud, the way to treat that horse.

"I don't want to get up on the carriage-house," whispered Elizabeth. "I might soil my dress."

"He's only fooling. We'll go back to the porch before he starts to get the horse out.

They were in the porch with the grown-ups when Bud tried to ride the broncho. Jim and Donnelly helped him get the animal out. They forced the bit into his mouth, although his mouth bled from the forcing, and they double cinched a big saddle on him. Then Bud tried for about the tenth time in a week to ride him. He worked for half an hour before he even got foot into a stirrup and his leg over the broncho; then the animal pitched viciously and suddenly rolled on the ground, the cowboy under him.

Mary ran to him, utterly forgetful of herself, not even hearing her uncle's call to stop as he followed her. She ran to the broncho on her way to Bud. The outlaw stopped short, and the little girl looked into his eyes.

"Poor horsie!" she said. "Poor little buckskin. You must n't hurt Bud!" She reached up and patted his nose. "Go to the corral! Do you hear! Go to the corral!"

The broncho seemed to understand what Mary said. He lifted his head and trotted away to the corral. As Bud sat up Mary hurried to him with an anxious face.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"I'm all right," he said. "Don't you be worried about me. I'd get up from the dead

to see you talk baby-talk to that bronk. You beat the Dutch, little 'un!"

"I do hope you 're not hurt?" she asked.

"He knocked me out for a minute, that's all," Bud got to his feet as Mr. Merwin came up.

"Say, Boss," he said. "You write a letter to the Elks that we will present 'em a saddle-horse for their fair, one that 's a regular pet for women 'n' children."

"All right, Bud, it's a go. I'll telephone them now."

Bud limped away to the house, accompanied by his employer and Mary. They telephoned to the Elks' secretary at Cheyenne that Mr. William Merwin authorized Bud Todd to present a fine saddle-horse to the Elks' Fair.

"Now Todd," said Mr. Merwin, "we'll have some fun and find out what they do with your charitable offering when we go down to Cheyenne on Frontier Day." He turned to Mary as Bud went out of the room. "Look here, young lady, you keep away from that buckskin. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, uncle, but he did mind me though, did n't he?" exulted the little girl.

When she went up-stairs to Elizabeth's room with her that night, the visitor said as she took off her guimpe:

“ Papa says he wishes I liked horses as well as you do.”

“ Well, anyhow, I am not afraid of a horse,” said Mary.

CHAPTER X

AUNT KATE'S BERRY PARTY

"I WONDER who would like to go berrying with me this afternoon?" Aunt Kate asked at the end of noon dinner next day.

Charlie and Bert held up both hands.

"Count me in!" said Bert.

"I'll show you where there are lots and lots of berries," volunteered Charlie.

"You're coming to my party, Freddy, too?" invited Mrs. Merwin. "You always pick berries so fast."

"Thank you, mother," replied her eldest son, "but I'll let father have my chance, and I'll look after the haying."

"All right, my son," said Mr. Merwin. "How about you?" He turned to Mr. Wright.

"Nothing I should like better!" said the cordial visitor. "And I know Bessy will like it."

"Are you going?" Elizabeth asked Mary.

Mary's face was thoughtful. She remembered the dreadful time when last she looked for strawberries, and was frightened by the rattlesnakes.

Mrs. Merwin understood,—

“Uncle Billy will go with us, Mary,” she said.

Mary gave her a grateful glance.

“Yes, Elizabeth, of course I’m going,” she said. “You and I will see which one can get the most berries. Let’s go and get ready.

“I’ll go as I am,” said Elizabeth.

Mary made no comment, but she knew that Elizabeth’s white dress and shoes might come to grief; she hurried away to put on her own oldest dress.

Seven people and three dogs started up river about two o’clock, every one armed with basket or pail, varying in size from Bert’s tin lard-pail to the market-basket that Mrs. Merwin hung on Senator Wright’s arm. They crossed to the island, passed the Old Channel, went along the bank of the mountain for half a mile, then down to a wild grassy place near the stream, where Charlie was sure that they would find berries.

“Last year I got a bushel of ’em here a week earlier than this,” he said to his mother, with a disappointed face, when they had looked for awhile in vain.

“Never mind, dearie,” she replied, then to her husband: “Billy, why can’t we go across the river and up to that meadow yonder?”

“We can, all right. I’ve got on my rubber boots purposely for wading. I can lend ’em to

the Senator to get across in." He led the way to a shallow place where the rushing water was not over the tops of his rubber boots, stepped out into the water and backed up to Mary, saying:

"Will you ride the donkey first, please, miss?"

"Let Auntie go first," laughed Mary, watching her aunt who at once crept out on that strong back and clasped her arms tightly around those broad shoulders. Bending forward to resist the rush of the stream around his legs, and with his burden on his back, Mr. Merwin forded the stream and landed his wife on the other side.

He came over for Mary and again for Elizabeth. Then he sent Bert paddling back barefooted with his rubber boots for Mr. Wright.

"Why can't I wade without my shoes like Charlie and you and the dogs," Mr. Wright asked Bert.

"Feel of the water," Bert made answer.

Mr. Wright stooped and put his hand into the stream.

"Whew! it is icy, is n't it!" he exclaimed.

"Comes right off the snow, but I like it." Bert kicked one bare foot on the other to take out the stinging of the snow water. Mr. Wright put on the rubber boots and waded over carrying his shoes and stockings.

A little way farther and Aunt Kate came first upon a dream of a place to pick wild strawberries,

a mountain meadow, set round on three sides with clumps of trees. The river was on one side; and an irrigating ditch led straight across the middle of grassy deeps where thousands of sweet tiny berries were ripening under the August sun.

"Everybody begin at once on this side," she commanded. "Let's pick right across the field."

They all began in good earnest, but who ever picked berries in regular order! The berries were all over the place, hiding here, peeping out yonder, red and tempting.

"Not fair to eat them all up!" said Charlie, coming upon Mary alone near a clump of alders, her lips smeared with the red juice.

"I only tasted a few!" she protested. "Are n't they perfectly delicious?" For a long time Mary picked and picked, not stopping to speak to anyone until her basket was more than half full. She was surprised as she moved on to see how the berries shook down and how long it took to get enough of them to pass the half full mark in her basket. She kept near her aunt and uncle who worked side by side; they seemed to know just where to look for the nicest strawberries.

Presently Uncle Billy stood up and stretched himself, Mr. Wright followed his example.

"Stiff work for old backs," remarked Mr. Wright.

"There are no old backs here, though," said

Mrs. Merwin, merrily, looking up from under her white sunbonnet. Then she sprang to her feet exclaiming:

“For mercy’s sake, Billy, how dark it is!”

Thunder rumbled as she spoke.

“I’ve been looking at that black cloud for several minutes, hoping it would go round,” he said, “but it means business. We’ve got to make tracks for shelter.”

“Boys!” she called. “Come on, all hands!”

A few big drops of rain pattered upon them as they hurried homeward. The air was suddenly breathless, then the wind began to freshen. By the time they came to Oggerson’s haystacks the thunder was crashing, and jagged lightning in broad bands flamed up and down the sky. Rain came with a rushing wind, and they hurriedly crawled into the stack just as the hail began. Huge hailstones, half as big as her fist, were pelting Mary’s ankles as she crawled out of the storm into the warm, dry nest her uncle scooped out in the heart of the hay. Bert and Charlie burrowed in on one side; Mr. Wright and Elizabeth in another hay cavern close by.

“Don’t eat your berries, boys!” shouted Mrs. Merwin, sitting up and taking off her sunbonnet, adding in a lower voice: “It would be just like those boys to eat all they picked. I want to make strawberry shortcake for supper.”

Mary gazed at her aunt wondering to see her sit there talking about supper, when it looked as if they might have to stay in the haystack all night. The wind roared with fury. The hailstones covered the ground as if there had been a snow-storm.

"I hope Fred has got the horses sheltered from this wind," said Mr. Merwin.

"Trust Bud to look after Fred," replied his wife. "What I am worrying about is my rose-bush at the south of the house. It is so hard to get garden roses to grow at this altitude!"

"Too bad, my dear! How are you getting on, puss?" Her uncle asked Mary.

"I'm all right," said Mary, snuggling up to his side.

The wind beat on their place of safety, the hailstones pelted down. For nearly an hour they stayed there out of the reach of wind and weather.

Then the storm ceased, the dogs came drenched from the place they had found for themselves under the lee of the stack. The people crawled out, all except Elizabeth.

"My little girl went to sleep," said Mr. Wright.

"Bertie, you and Charlie wait here with Mary till Elizabeth wakes up," said Mrs. Merwin, who was busy pouring everybody's berries into one

large pail. "Mr. Wright, will you come home with me and help me carry these berries?"

"With pleasure," said the Senator.

"I'll send Malley back on horseback to lead Fireball for the girls to ride home so that they need n't get their feet wet wading through this hail."

"And what shall this little boy do, mother?" asked Mr. Merwin.

"Whatever you please," she answered.

"Well, I'll go and make it right with Ogger-son for breaking into his berry field as well as his new hay-stack."

"His berry field!" exclaimed Mrs. Merwin.

"It really *is* time that you knew where our land leaves off and Oggerson's begins, Kate. But as this was your berry party and I was only invited, I had to go where you took me and—"

"Hush! Stop your teasing," she laughed. "Do go and make it right with him. Come, Mr. Wright!" and she was off towards home.

It was chilly standing about on the icy ground, so after their elders had gone Bert and Charlie began to work at building a snow-man, and Mary helped, picking up hailstones. They had a fine-looking man built before Elizabeth crawled yawning out of the stack. Her white dress was crumpled and soiled, her white shoes muddy.

Bert was just putting his straw hat on the snow-man's head.

"Well, Little Boy Blue under the haystack fast asleep?" he said.

Elizabeth paid no attention to him. "Where's father?" she asked Mary.

"He went back to the house with Aunt Kate," answered Mary.

Elizabeth sighed.

"I don't think I care much for this rough sort of life," she murmured.

Mary could hardly keep her face straight.

"This snow-man likes it," she said. "Let me introduce Mr. Hailstones, Miss Wright."

Bert took his hat off the snow-man's head and said, for him:

"Happy to meet you, Miss Wright."

Elizabeth looked cross.

"I don't think much of this climate," she said. "The idea of a snow-man in August!"

"Sorry you don't admire me, Miss Wright," giggled Bert. Charlie nudged him, he toppled against the snow-man, grasped Charlie, and in the tussle all three went down together. Bert got to his feet first.

"I don't care for this rough life," he said.

"Hush!" said Mary. But Elizabeth was walking away indignantly in the direction of the Oggerson house.

"Nobody likes to be mocked, boys," said Mary. She ran to overtake the visitor, and with Elizabeth waded through the sleet to the Oggersons' log house. When they got there they were shivering. Mrs. Oggerson said her husband was out of doors with Mr. Merwin. The kind old woman asked the little girls to come into her kitchen, where a good fire was burning, and made them dry their feet and drink hot milk. They waited there for nearly an hour, in comfort, while Mrs. Oggerson sat knitting and telling them stories of the hardships of her early days in Wyoming, when the Indians were troublesome and the first railroad was being built. Mary was saying how much she wished she could see an Indian when Uncle Billy came for them and they went out into the yard.

Mary could scarcely believe her eyes. Not a sign of the hail-storm remained. The sun was shining hot in the blue sky. The ground was dry where the snowy sheets had been and the grasshoppers were darting about in the yellow grass.

Malley was waiting for them on Tom, leading Fireball, but Elizabeth was afraid to get on her back and walked home with Mr. Merwin, while Mary cantered away beside the new hired man.

When they all sat down to supper at night, they found the berries they had picked that after-

noon served in little short-cakes, each one about the size of a breakfast roll. There were three apiece for everybody.

"This is the best short-cake I have tasted since I was a boy at home in Ohio," said Senator Wright.

"Thank you, sir," said Mrs. Merwin. "But in Ohio your wild strawberries did n't come through snow and ice, did they?"

"Indeed they did not," said Mr. Wright heartily.

"Bill Nye, the humorist, once lived in Laramie," said Mr. Merwin, passing the cream. "He used to say that Wyoming has two seasons, July and Winter."

CHAPTER XI

OVER THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE

WHEN the haying was done, Bud Todd and Jim went to Cheyenne, leading the little buckskin to the Elks for their fair. Mary said good-bye to the broncho with some sadness, but her mind was on the camping outfit which her uncle was making ready to take Senator Wright over the range. To her great delight Mary was permitted to go with them. Elizabeth remained at the ranch with Mrs. Merwin. They started on a pleasant August afternoon about four o'clock, intending to drive only fifteen miles the first day and sleep in quarters Mr. Merwin engaged by telephone at a ranch-house near the foot of the range. Mr. Merwin had covered the spring wagon with a tent cover like those used by emigrants for their heavier wagons. They were protected by this from the fierce heat of the mid-day sun, as well as from sudden showers.

On the wide spring seat up in front sat Mary, between her uncle and Mr. Wright. Her face looked very bright when she waved good-bye to

her aunt that afternoon as her uncle gathered up the reins, and Dick and Dolly, the bays, trotted off towards the big gate.

In the back of the wagon was stowed a tent, three army blankets, and a roll of tarpaulin, a few dishes in a basket, their cooking utensils, and provisions for man and beast, enough to last a week. There were two satchels and a valise containing extra clothing for the three travellers.

Mary was dressed in one of her red serge riding-habits, skirt, jacket, and bloomers, with a red tam on her head.

"Well, puss, your cheeks are almost as bright as your clothes," said Uncle Billy when they had passed through the gate, and were fairly off across the plain towards Sheep Mountain. She looked up at him with happy eyes.

"You don't seem to be a bit pleased starting off on your travels with me again," he added. "I don't believe you like to go!"

Mary made no reply. Her heart was too full to say anything, but her eyes said all that heart could wish.

There had been a time yesterday when it looked very much as if she would be left behind. Elizabeth did not wish to go on the expedition herself, but she did not care to have her father so willing to leave her behind, and she coaxed Mary to stay at the ranch with her until she was on the point

of staying at home. But Aunt Kate intervened and nothing more was said about her giving up the excursion she had been dreaming of for days.

She sang as they drove along to a gay rollicking tune learned in a Mother Goose quadrille:

“The King of France and twenty thousand men
Marched up the hill and then marched down again!”

Mr. Wright joined in, his bass voice chiming with Mary's sweet soprano, making music because they could not help it, for pleasure in the day and the journey.

They drove on and round the bend of Sheep Mountain on and on and came at sunset to the ranch on Little River where they were to spend the night. As their covered wagon drew up at the side of the house, they heard the sound of a gun and a voice hallooed:

“Hold on there! Wait a minute.”

Mary leaned forward and saw two men with guns shooting at young roosters that were making off from the barn-yard as fast as they could go. Two of the roosters fell. One of the men went after them and the other came to the side of the wagon.

“Howdy,” he said. “I did n't want to shoot you up. Light now!”

Mr. Wright's face wore such a look of aston-

ishment that the host and Mr. Merwin burst out laughing.

"Pretty tame sport, I own, shooting barnyard fowls," confessed the master of Little River Ranch. "But my wife set her heart on giving you fried chicken for supper as soon as we got your telephone message. She sent me off on the mountain for raspberries, so I did n't get time to get the chickens for her before. The wild west ain't what it used to be," he added, shaking hands with Senator Wright. "Wildest I can do for you is wild raspberries." He laughed again.

"It does seem civilized to find the telephone everywhere," said Mr. Wright. "But there's a good deal of open country left yet."

"Land, yes! Plenty of men up in the hills too that never spoke through a telephone, men that eat fried bear for fresh meat to get a change from salt pork. Well, walk into the house, gentlemen. Come, sissy."

Mary slept that night on a couch in the parlor of the ranch-house. She put her comb and brush on the cottage organ and looked into a picture of Longfellow's children for a mirror.

Next morning they had an early breakfast and were off soon after sunrise. They travelled all day, with only an hour's rest at noon, towards the peaks that looked so near, and camped at night

beside a creek that seemed as far from the mountains as when they started in the morning.

Mary will never forget, even when she is an old lady, that first night in camp. It was sunset when they stopped. Uncle Billy unhitched the horses. After watering them at the creek, he tied them each to one of the wagon wheels, and gave them their feed on the ground. Then he built a fire of dry cottonwood twigs and boughs that Mr. Wright helped him gather; he cut two large saplings and forked them together over his fire. In these forked sticks he hung their camp kettle. Mary had been watching him with interest until he got the kettle, then she exclaimed:

“Dear me, Uncle Billy! I must n’t let you do all the housework!”

She climbed into the wagon and explored among the provisions. Emerging with a bag of salt and a package of puffed rice, she climbed down over the wheel feeling very useful. Uncle Billy smiled.

“I guess we’ll save that rice for your breakfast.” He took the things from her and climbed back into the wagon. Then he handed out a frying-pan, a large piece of bacon with a knife to slice it, a loaf of bread, a package of coffee, and a coffee-pot.

“Those are the first necessities of a camp supper, Mary,” he said. “Now, we’ll see what little

tidbits we can find for you. Hi!" he suddenly shouted with laughter, and produced a basket with a table-cloth and napkins. "Your aunt got tony because you folks are along!" He passed out the basket. "Well, we'll use them for fun." He handed them out to Mary. She spread the cloth on the grass and put the napkins about, while her uncle came with a can of cookies labelled in her aunt's handwriting, "For Mary."

Uncle Billy soon had supper ready. Mary had never liked bacon, but now she sat happily on the ground eating hot bacon sandwiches as her uncle speared slices of bacon from the frying-pan to the slices of bread.

When they had eaten supper, Mr. Merwin pitched the little tent, took some tent-cloth, spread it inside on the ground, and threw into the tent two of the army blankets for himself and Senator Wright.

"There, that's luxury!" he said. "Many's the time I've rolled myself in my blanket and slept under the stars with no tarpaulin under me."

The air was very dry and the sky full of stars made a soft, brilliant light.

When Uncle Billy had taken out the spring seat and put its cushions down in the bottom of the wagon with two warm blankets, Mary's bed was ready. But she sat up for an hour by the fire beside her uncle while he told stories and the

coyotes howled afar off. Mary woke about two o'clock that night and sat up in her blanket roll looking at the stars, feeling warm and cosy, and happy with the wonder and beauty of it all.

The next day they travelled westward over the great plateau, and camped again at night beside a stream. Mary was awakened from her first sound sleep in the wagon on that second night by the most terrible sound she had ever heard in her life. It was like the scream of some one in deathly distress. Yet it was unearthly, inhuman, and Mary felt almost stifled with horror, as she sat up, suddenly wide awake. The horses were munching contentedly close by. Over in the little tent, was her uncle, asleep. Again came that wild sound, and from the opposite direction! It was answering the first call which an instant later was repeated, more dreadful than before.

"Indians!" said Mary to herself, and she grew cold with fear. She had read of such things, but she never knew before how one's scalp can prickle and each hair seem to stand up by itself on one's head, and all one's body seem turning to ice. But in spite of her fear she resolved to warn her sleeping uncle. She was sure that the Indians were surrounding them. That must be their war cry! Uncle Billy should not be murdered in his sleep.

Mary climbed out over the wagon wheel, in spite of her terror. Barefooted and in her outing-flannel wrapper, she ran over the cold ground and rushed into the little tent, even as that awful moaning yell sounded again through the silent night.

"Hi! Who's there?" She heard the click of a pistol as Mr. Wright sat up. In the same instant she heard her uncle's voice exclaiming:

"Why, darling, what's the matter?" He knew by the plainsman's instinct that no enemy was near.

"Indians, Indians!" gasped Mary between her chattering teeth. "They are sounding the war whoop! I was afraid they would kill you. Oh, listen." Again came that awful scream.

"A screech-owl!" Uncle Billy laughed aloud. "You poor child! That's not Indians. That's only a pair of screech-owls." He got up and wrapped a blanket around the shivering child, and carried her back to her wagon bed.

"I ought to have told you about them. I don't wonder they scared you, dearest," he said, as he tucked her warmly into her blanket roll. "I'll stay here with you till you go to sleep." He wrapped himself in the blanket from the tent. "Shall I tell you a story?" he asked.

"Not about adventures, thank you," whispered Mary, speaking for the first time. She was try-

ing hard not to cry in the reaction after her alarm.

“No, no, pussy, I’ll tell you what I will do. I’ll sing ‘Hush My Dear’ to you. How would you like that?”

Mary laughed nervously. “Yes, do sing ‘Hush My Dear’ to me! I suppose I was a baby to get so frightened, but that screech did sound terrible, Uncle Billy.”

“Of course it did; I have been scared stiff by them myself.”

“You won’t tell Bert and Charlie on me?”

“Not much. Mum’s the word. Now cuddle down. He began to sing in a rich, low voice, repeating the song when he had finished, and repeating it again. Soon the stars blinked out of sight in the sky and Mary was asleep, hearing the echo of his voice crooning:

“Heavenly blessings without number
Gently falling on thy head.”

On the third night they came to Conness Mountain Ranch, where they all rested for a day before they went up on the mountain to look at the shaft leading into the first of the ore lands that Mr. Wright had come to Wyoming to see. Mary did not go up on the mountain with the men. She rested at the ranch-house and the next day they all went to a small hotel in the mountain town.

Here Mary played in the hotel parlor with the landlady's little girl while her uncle and Mr. Wright went back to the copper mine up on the mountain. When they started in the wagon next morning they talked all the time about copper and mining, ores and shafts and smelters, and Mary made up her mind to go with them to the next mine. They made a long climb that day through the hills of the Medicine Bow by a narrow wagon road that wound upward along the sides of pine-clad mountains, across open spaces, past wild fantastic boulders that looked like giants and cañons and corners of churches tumbled about at the creation of the world.

The only animals that they saw were chipmunks, tiny animals, which were smaller and smaller as the altitude grew higher, until they were not much bigger than mice.

They stopped to water their horses at a golden clear creek flowing across one of the wide meadow openings that mountain people call a park. They all got out of the wagon, for Mary wanted some flowers that grew on the bank.

"You have crossed the Continental Divide, Mary," said her Uncle Billy. "This water flows to the Gulf of California, instead of to the Gulf of Mexico."

Mary stooped and dipped some of the water and drank it. She looked up with a funny,

whimsical expression on her face, dipped and tasted again.

"Well, it is all United States water," she said. "I can't see that it's any different from the water at home or at the ranch."

Uncle Billy patted her on the shoulder.

"Your travels have broadened your mind," he said. "You are soon going to see a town, though, that looks different from any town that you ever saw before."

"I never saw anything like this before myself," said Mr. Wright as they drove into the mining-camp, just before noon.

It was a collection of new log cabins scattered about irregularly in a grove of tall pine-trees that made a solemn singing sound in the mountain breeze. Many of the trees had been cut down, leaving stumps higher than Mary's head, for the woodsmen's axes had done their work in winter when the snow lay several feet deep on the ground. As they drove along the road of the town, they heard a sound of singing. It came from a log schoolhouse, and as they passed they saw through the open door a young lady and a dozen children.

"They are singing before school closes for the noon recess," said Mary. "But why do they have school in summer?"

"Too deep snow for little kids to wade through

in winter up at this altitude," replied Uncle Billy.

They left their team at a log stable and went on foot across a brook and up a climb of the road to the miners' boarding-house where they were to have their dinner. As she sat down on a rocking-chair in the porch, after climbing up the steep steps of the house, Mary felt very queer. Her temples throbbed, her side ached. As she looked at her uncle, everything grew misty before her. She tried to speak; her voice would not come, just as in a dream. She heard her uncle saying:

"Never mind, chick! Here, take a drink of water. It is the altitude. We're nearly eleven thousand feet up here."

Mary had heard a good deal about altitude in Wyoming, but she had no idea it could affect any one like this. The Swedish woman who worked in the boarding-house came out to say that dinner was ready, and when she saw Mary she exclaimed:

"Sometimes dey gets like dat, sometimes dey nose bleeds, sometimes dey gets fits to the aldidood. When I first came to dis coundry my heart aches like to bust hisself night and day."

Mary smiled and felt better. "I'm hungry," she whispered.

"Dat's aldidood, also," said the woman. So they went in for dinner. The three sat at one

end of a long table in a large room made of unfinished lumber. At the head of the table was the manager of the mine, whom Uncle Billy knew. About the table were ranged twenty men eating beef, potatoes, and pie. They came and went in groups of three or four until all of the men who were above ground at this shift had eaten their dinner.

The manager came and spoke to Mary as she sat in the porch afterwards, waiting for her uncle

“Would you like to come to the mine with me now?” he asked. “Your uncle is down yonder smoking with the stranger and he said he’d find you over by the engine if you would like to take a look around with me. I’ve got a little girl of my own about your size back east in Nebraska.”

“Thank you,” said Mary rising. “I’d like to come very much.”

They went down the steps and along the road a short distance to sheds which covered the shaft. There was an engine there which worked up and down the buckets that came from time to time to the mouth of the shaft, which was like a wide deep well down into the mountain. The manager introduced Mary to the engineer, who explained to her how his engine did its work. He told her that he spent much of the time beside the

engine himself, not liking to trust it too long to his present assistant, who was a boy.

"I had a good engineer to help me, but he has gone off out west," he said.

Mary looked at him and then about her curiously. Here were great piles of strangely colored ores, there were the tall stumps; below ground men were digging in the heart of the mountain for copper. In her nostrils was the keen sweet air of the high mountains.

"Is n't this out west?" she timidly asked the engineer. He smiled in an understanding way.

"I suppose it does seem west to you, coming from way back east as you do, but my assistant rode three days and nights west yet on the cars to get to Seattle."

The manager came up to Mary with a lump of odd-colored ore in his hand.

"Here's some fine copper," he said. "You can take it along home with you and show them what we are smelting out our way, to make into telephone wires for you, and all sorts of things."

"Thank you," said Mary.

Just as her uncle and Mr. Wright came the huge bucket from the mine shot up into view, and a man stepped out. The engineer had signalled for him to come up and get the visitors.

"Well, puss, are you going down into the mine

with us?" asked her uncle, nodding towards the shaft.

"Me!" said Mary flushing.

"You need n't if you don't want to."

"Of course I want to, if you go," she answered, bravely enough, but not feeling half as brave as she looked.

They went with the manager and he lent Mr. Merwin and Mr. Wright oilskin suits to put on. He gave Mary an oilskin cap for her head, and a boy's rubber coat that quite covered her. She hung her red tam and jacket across a barrel, and with her hand clasped in her uncle's stepped out to the edge of the shaft and looked down. It was very dark down there. Mary got into the bucket with the rest, but when the thing began to move she grasped her uncle's arm with both her arms and hung fast while the engineer let them slowly down into the ground.

They had scarcely got out of sight of the light at the mouth of the shaft before their guide said "Here we are at the first level." It was a damp tunnel where a number of men were mining by lights arranged at regular intervals. Mary heard a great deal of explanation about levels and depths and ore bodies which interested Mr. Wright and Mr. Merwin, but she clung fast to her uncle's arm and kept saying over and over to herself, to keep from being afraid:

“Intra mintra, cutra corn,
Apple seed and apple thorn,
Wier brier, limber lock,
Six geese in a flock.”

She was saying it over for about the twentieth time when they shot up into daylight again. Uncle Billy, looking down at the silent little figure beside him, saw that her face was pale, and her lips were moving. He said nothing, but took her at once to the cabin where they were to stay. There he told her to lie down on the cot where she was to sleep that night, and gave her a glass of hot lemonade. Mary soon fell asleep and had one of those long afternoon naps which make the evening so pleasant.

The manager came after supper and took them all for a short walk in the moonlight up through the beautiful shadowy pines to an outlook in a high place. The pine-trees made soft music overhead. When they came to the outlook they saw the high wonderful world in the brilliant moonlight. Not far away the snowy white peaks of the range were shining against the violet sky.

“I made a mistake coming this way,” said Mr. Merwin the next afternoon when they were half a day’s journey on the road towards home. He had been grave for several minutes. Now he was

standing in the wagon looking backward over the canvas top.

“What’s the trouble?” asked Mr. Wright.

Mary gazed with anxious eyes at her uncle’s serious face.

“Don’t be afraid—. Whew!” Mr. Merwin tightened the reins; the horses moved forward, sniffing nervously. “The woods must be on fire again above Lower Gulch!”

“Oh, I smell smoke!” cried Mary.

Mr. Merwin handed the reins to Mr. Wright, got out of the wagon, went back a short distance and reconnoitred from an outlook.

“Those woods are on fire off there at the right,” he said when he came back. “The wind is bearing the fire down to the neck of woods yonder that we have to go through. If we can get across the Gulch there we shall be all right.” He sat down taking the reins again.

“Hadn’t we better go back the way we came?” asked Mr. Wright.

“We can’t now. The fire will be burning across that upper road, ten miles back, long before we could strike across. Up hill, too! Get up!” He called to the bays and they made off at a good pace down the long hill road toward the point of safe crossing through the great wall of purple smoke-cloud that began to darken the sun.

Mary looked at her uncle in silence. Her lips were set firmly. She was thinking. "Uncle Billy must be dreadfully anxious to look like that."

A line settled on either side of his mouth; he frowned as he urged his horses forward. The great distant smoke-cloud with which they were racing grew denser and more dark. As they came to a level place on the road, Mr. Merwin whipped his horses to a run and the spring-wagon went bumping along at a tremendous rate.

The smell of smoke grew stronger and stronger. They came out into an opening of the woodland road and looked off to the place they were racing to reach. It was still untouched, but the big smoke-cloud was drawing very near.

"Uncle Billy, could n't we go faster if we were on the horses?" asked Mary. He did not seem to hear her. She put her fingers against his neck. "Uncle Billy!" she insisted.

"Yes, dear?" he answered.

He glanced at her then. His face was gray and Mary knew that it was anxiety for her.

"I said, let's get on the horses. Can't we go faster that way? Or don't you want to leave the wagon?"

“The wagon be hanged!” said Mr. Merwin.
“It’s of no account.”

“Look!” cried Mary.

Reddish yellow flames were mingling with the purple smoke-wall now. The forest was on fire. Not five miles away, great tongues of fire were lapping upwards from the tops of tall old dead-wood trees, and scorching the green wood of the jack-pines.

Mary climbed over the wheel to the ground the moment that her uncle stopped the horses. While he unhitched them, she got up on Dick’s back. By the time that Mr. Wright was on the other horse, her uncle was on Dick behind her; then they all galloped off towards the neck of woods where they must cross the stream to reach the place of safety.

On they ran, on and on! But the fire was there before them. As they entered the neck of woods, the flames were creeping in among the dead underbrush. For a mile at their right the unchecked fire was marching through the forest. They could feel its breadth on their faces as the snorting, terrified horses picked their way over fallen trees, then down the crumbling bank and across the little stream.

Once across Mr. Merwin had felt sure of their safety; but as Dick came up the first rise of ground beyond the water they saw that a lesser

fire was marching down from the hills on the other side. In ten minutes at most the two fires must meet. It was death for man or beast caught in that double flame.



Through the burning forest

CHAPTER XII

WHEN THE INDIANS CAME

MR. MERWIN tore off his coat and wrapped it round Mary's head to keep her from breathing flame.

"You'll get burned your own self, Uncle Billy!" protested Mary as he wrapped her.

There followed a dark smothered time as good old Dick put back his ears and ran straight between the two marching fires while the other horse pounded faithfully after. It seemed to Mary that she should choke before Uncle Billy swung her free and she could sit up and breathe deep again. Uncle Billy turned their horse around; they sat for a few moments looking at the meeting of the two great pillars of cloud, shot through with consuming flame. Then Mary cried aloud.

"Oh, Uncle Billy, look! Your poor, dear arms!"

Patches of his shirt sleeves were scorched away; the flesh below was burned. Uncle Billy looked instead at her loving, anguished little face.

"Never you mind, Mary. Don't you worry. Cotton cloth is cheap! Aunt Kate won't scold us for getting my shirt burned as long as your new red jacket is all right."

Mary put up her hand and patted his cheek. Then she tore her handkerchief in two and tied up one of his arms; she took his own handkerchief out of his pocket and tied up the other to keep the air from the smarting burns.

"It is a wonder you did n't breathe flame," he said to Mr. Wright.

"Me? Oh, I hid my face in my hat like you and got through all right."

"This is nothing," said Mr. Merwin. "I fought fire once that gave me that!" He turned back his collar and showed a scar on his neck. "The fire really got hold of me then and chewed. Well, let's see if we can make Lower Gulch Ranch by supper-time and find an outfit to get us home to-morrow."

Five miles down stream they came to a ranch-house where they could telephone to Red Top and there they spent the night. Next day the master of Lower Gulch took them all home in his spring wagon, their own horses following on behind, the harnesses in the wagon.

"Well, Mary, how does it seem to be living in the house again?" asked Aunt Kate, putting

down her book one cool August evening two nights later as they all sat around the sitting-room lamp. Mr. Wright and Elizabeth had gone; everybody was reading.

"It seems lovely, just lovely," said Mary, looking up with a smile. "When I woke this morning and saw the pink rose-buds on my wall-paper, I did n't know at first where I was. I thought they looked too big for stars."

"The most fun of camping out is getting home and talking about how much fun it was," said Uncle Billy contentedly from his arm-chair.

"Well, I don't know about that, father," said Fred. "When you and I rode through Yellowstone Park last summer, you said almost every night when we made camp that it beat staying at home all hollow."

"Oh, well, I said that last summer. That was before I lost my spring wagon." Mr. Merwin reached for one of the new August magazines. "Maybe I'll say the same thing next summer again. Can't I change my mind now and then as well as your mother?"

"Your father is a philosopher, Fred," remarked Mary with an air.

"What is your definition of a philosopher, Miss Lloyd?" inquired Fred, with solemnity.

"Yes, tell us, chick," said her uncle.

"Well," Mary paused to think. "A philo-

sopher is a gentleman—or lady—who takes things as they come, and does n't make a fuss."

"Good!" said Uncle Billy.

"You are something of a philosopher yourself, Mary. That's why you are so popular in this family," said Fred.

Mary got up and made him a courtesy.

"Thank you, sir," she said.

"What are you reading?" asked her aunt, holding out her hand for the book. Mary came and showed her. It was Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking."

"I thought so," said Aunt Kate, with a smile, and laughed.

"It's a daisy book," said Mary. "Now don't tell me to go to bed. Your face has just the look it always has when you are going to say 'Bed-time!'"

"Please let us finish our chapters! Please, mamma! We're good children to-night," pleaded Uncle Billy.

"All right," said Aunt Kate. She kept her arm around Mary and read with her until it was time to go to bed.

"I always loved that book myself," she said.

"But I never knew any Indians like those."

"Do you know any Indians, Auntie?" asked Mary.

"I have known a good many Indians first and

last, the Utes up here in the hills over the Colorado line before Government moved them out to Utah, Apaches in Arizona, and Shoshones when we have been up at our claims in the Big Horn country."

"I wish I could see an Indian," sighed Mary.

"Well, you can when we go to the races at Cheyenne, Frontier Day," said Fred. "The Shoshones always go to town in their wagons then for a good picnic like all the rest of Wyoming."

"Real live Indians!" exclaimed Mary. "Are n't people afraid of them?"

"Not a bit of it. They don't go on the war-path any more. They're peaceable citizens these days."

Mary looked thoughtful. She was wondering if people might not be deceived, if perhaps there might not be real danger from the Indian tribes. She secretly resolved to keep as far away from their wigwams as possible when she went with her uncle's family to Cheyenne for Frontier Day.

Next day Mary was over at the log play-house. She had been reading the Fenimore Cooper story, seated in the barrel chair at the entrance of her lodge, when out of the wilderness beyond three Indians emerged and came slowly towards her.

Mary neither saw nor heard them, she was so much absorbed in her book. Nearer they came and nearer until they were only a few yards distant. Then they paused and stood looking at her in silence. She sat there in her red gown, her eyes downcast, her fair hair tumbled by the breeze, her book in her hand, the flush of interest on her face.

One of the Indians spoke to the other in her own language, in a whisper:

"It is not well. She is a stranger in this region."

"None the less," replied in the same language the eldest and darkest of the three, "she may have the knowledge desired. I would myself speak to her if I were fluent as you in the lingo of the paleface. Of what value is all you have learned?"

"I will address her, if you command it," said the younger one who had first spoken, stepping forward.

Mary had looked up at sound of their voices. It seemed to her as if the Indians had stepped from the pages of her book. She was delighted rather than alarmed, all the more that the three Indians confronting her were,—two squaws and a pappoose, two women and a baby! She stood up, her finger in her closed book.

"The day wanes and you are far from home,"

said Mary. "May I not offer you such rude shelter as this cabin may afford?"

The elder squaw looked puzzled. Over her shoulder from the bundle where she carried him peeped the stolid brown face and inquiring eyes of the baby boy on her back.

The younger Indian woman smiled. She wore a clean white shirt-waist with sleeves in this year's style, a black serge skirt, a sailor hat, a black ribbon necktie and a white collar. On her feet were moccasins.

"We thank you for your hospitality, oh pale-face maiden," she replied in English, with an excellent accent.

"Goodness! You speak English!" cried Mary, very much excited.

The young woman smiled again, looking at the book in Mary's hand.

"We are indeed far from home and we have lost our way," she said. "If you are not a stranger in this region, it may be you can direct us towards Pine Landing?"

"Pine Landing! Mercy! That is nearly five miles up the river," cried Mary.

The young Indian woman dropped to the ground and signed to her mother to give her the baby. The old squaw came grumbling as she loosened the buckskin thongs which held the baby's bundle to her shoulders. Her own gar-

ments were a medley of buckskin and blanket. Her moccasins had seen much travel.

"Ugh!" she grunted, and muttered something in her own language.

"My mother says it's all my fault we are off the track," said the young woman, cuddling her baby. "She wanted to leave the river a long way back. You don't look as though you belonged to these parts?"

"No, my home is back east," replied Mary, who had been looking from one to the other with keen interest.

"I spotted you for a tenderfoot as soon as I set eyes on you," said the young woman. "If I had n't been sure of it by sight, I should have known it as soon as you began getting off book-talk at me. I'll bet you are reading one of Cooper's stories."

"Yes, I am," said Mary, too astonished for words.

"My teacher out in Ogden made me read some of them. Those books make me sort of tired."

"I like them," said Mary.

"Too much high falutin for me," said the young Indian woman. "I am half white myself. So is my husband. My name is Mrs. O'Brien. My mother's pure Ute, though. Her name is Bird-of-the-Mountain when she's at home. When we hit the trail for town I tell her

to call herself Mrs. Bird. It sounds more stylish."

"Won't you sit down, Mrs. Bird?" Mary pointed to the barrel chair.

The old squaw shook her head, dropped on the ground at the foot of a cottonwood tree, drew out an old clay pipe, and was soon surrounded by a cloud of evil-smelling tobacco smoke.

"Ma's got a grouch at white folks this summer," said Mrs. O'Brien. "She has been out at the White Rock Reservation in Utah ever since Uncle Sam took her ancestral Ute property up here in the hills away from her. She made me make my husband come back here and buy the land where she was born. You see my husband was educated and he does n't have to stay on the reservation. Ma came tramping back here from White Rock not long ago. She says the Great White Father at Washington who drove her ancestors' descendants into the desert is going to hear about it this fall."

"The President!"

"Yes. Ma's a born princess, though you would n't think it to look at her."

"An Indian princess like Pocahontas!" exclaimed Mary.

"Yes; she says she was just such a high stepper when she was young. She is not too old yet to stir up trouble among our Ute relations

out there in the reservation Government gave them."

"But if Government gave them the land ——" began Mary.

"Well, I can tell you it is pretty poor land out around White Rock. Ma's about right. Unless they strike radium or some other kind of ore out there the Utes can't get a living out of the ground."

The Indian baby finished his repast and lay back on his mother's lap and blinked at the sky.

"What is his name?" Mary knelt down on the grass beside the mother and child.

"Patsy. Patrick O'Brien, for his pa," said Mrs. O'Brien.

"Isn't he a dear!" Mary slipped her forefinger into the tiny paw that closed around it warmly. "There's nothing so nice in all the world as a baby, is there?"

Her face was on a level with the young mother's; they looked into each other's eyes for a moment as the woman replied:

"Well, babies do make a good deal of work. I am glad I had my mother to carry him for me to-day. We're on our way to Laramie to take the train for Cheyenne. My husband was to meet us at Pine Landing with a livery rig from Laramie. He's been on to town to tend to some

business. Have your folks in the house got a telephone?"

"How do you know there is any house near here except this one?" laughed Mary.

"Ah, verily, I know the signs of human habitation!" Mrs. O'Brien smiled. "Yonder curls the house fire which tells of a tea-kettle that boils on a stove." She rose and shook the twigs from her serge skirt. "Come, Ma, we'll go in and telephone to Pat that we're here."

The old squaw shook her head and said something in the Ute language. Mary looked at her with enormous curiosity.

"Ma makes a hit with you, does n't she?" said Mrs. O'Brien.

"Yes, she does. She interests me very much," answered Mary.

"She often tells me in Ute that I make her tired. She says I am neither an Indian woman nor paleface. She's the real old stuff herself, just the kind we make our ancestors of out in the country. Some of the girls at the school I went to in Ogden have Indian grandmas, but I have an Indian ma. My husband sent me to school all winter before I got married to educate me. He's educated himself. Sometimes he says he wishes I was n't. Well, I can thank my mother for one thing. She taught me to ride a horse as soon as I could walk. We're both going to ride in the

races at Cheyenne, Frontier Day. My husband wanted to try to enter me this year in the white women's races. But ma said she would n't go to Cheyenne herself if he did. She said it would be denying her and a disgrace. My mother is real particular. Well, come along, ma! Let's go into the house and telephone."

Again the old squaw shook her head and repeated her words.

"What does she say?" asked Mary.

"She says it is good enough for her in the cabin. She's got some food in her bundle. She says if you will let her she'll stay right here till I ring up Pat and drag her away."

"Oh, yes, she is welcome to stay."

Mary conducted Mrs. O'Brien, the boy in her arms, into the sitting-room by way of the front porch, introduced her to her aunt, and explained her wishes. Mrs. Merwin was kind and polite, and made the visitor comfortable when they learned by telephone from Pine Landing that Patrick O'Brien, not finding his wife and mother-in-law there, had gone up into the hills by the trail they were coming down. Mrs. Merwin gave Mrs. O'Brien and her child the room Elizabeth Wright had occupied and went out with Mary to see the Indian mother. She was greatly relieved, on finding a blanket squaw, that Mrs. Bird preferred to stay in Mary's cabin for the night.

It was late that evening before, by dint of telephoning on both sides, Mr. O'Brien learned where his lost family had found shelter, and late the next forenoon when he appeared with his horses and spring wagon and carried them off to town.

"We'll have to nail boards over the old cabin, I guess, Mary," said her uncle after supper that evening. "You do seem to catch the strangest kind of folks in your play-house that I ever saw. That old Ute woman is one of old Ouray's kin, and he was a fighter.

"Was he a chief?"

"Yes, and the chief of our troubles when we first came out to Wyoming. We had trouble enough with those fellows, from over the Colorado line."

"I thought they had all gone for good," said Aunt Kate.

"Mrs. Bird-of-the-Mountain has been out in Utah, but she came back to see her daughter," explained Mary, "and little Patsy. Isn't he the cunningest baby!"

"I am glad you admire him," laughed Uncle Billy. "To me that brown kid looks worse than the burned edge of a buckwheat cake."

CHAPTER XIII

FRONTIER DAY

MARY had heard a good deal about Frontier Day ever since she arrived in Wyoming.

As the time drew near for the great annual August festival of riding, roping, and racing at Cheyenne, there was much bustle of preparation at Red Top Ranch. Mrs. Merwin rode Venus cross-saddle, every morning; the famous mare was in training for the ladies' thoroughbred race. Fred was busy with cow-ponies he was to ride, and dashed about the ranch with a preoccupied air. The hired men were full of excitement and anticipation. Bud Todd alone was serene.

"You see it's like this," he said to Mary out by the corral, the evening before he started with Fred and Jim and Donnelly and the string of horses they were to lead to Cheyenne. "It's like this. I am entered for the wild horse race and for the bucking and pitching contests. A man has to know how for years to be in them races. You can't go and get up your examination papers the last day in the afternoon.

"No, I suppose not. I do wish I could ride at Frontier Day." Mary looked wistfully through the rails at Fireball in the corral.

"It's a pity they don't have a Little-Girl-and-Trick-Mare race," responded Bud sympathetically. "Say!" he added with energy. "There's no reason you can't ride your Fireball even if you don't race her. I'll take her to Cheyenne for you. Why don't you speak to your uncle? He's got influence. He could take you right inside the mile track. You'd have lots more fun in the saddle than sitting starched up in the grand stand."

Mary gave him a grateful look and ran to find her uncle. He was sitting in the front porch with Aunt Kate.

"No reason why not!" said Uncle Billy heartily when he heard of Bud's plan. "Bud can lead Nibs along to town for me too, and you and I will see the show together in style."

Two days later, Mr. and Mrs. Merwin, with Mary, Bert, and Charlie, started for Laramie in the new spring wagon, at four o'clock in the morning to take the early eastbound train for Cheyenne. They had baggage with them for a three days' stay. They got up by lamplight; dawn was just coming as they ate breakfast at the table on the porch. Mary was the first one in this out-door breakfast-room.

"I'm sorry you are not going to Cheyenne too, to see the show," she said to Mrs. Malley, who was spreading the cloth and putting the plates on the breakfast table.

"Thank you, but I'd rather stay at home and get rested."

"It will rest you, I suppose, not to have to cook for anybody but Job and yourself, won't it?" said Mary.

"Yes, and I'll enjoy helping him look after the calves and things. I'm too busy most of the time to get out and take a look at the growing creatures. And I'm powerful fond of animals myself, just like you."

Mary nodded appreciatively, then clapped her hands as Bert and Charlie came tumbling downstairs.

"I'm up first! I'm up first!" she cried.

"It seems just like the Fourth of July, does n't it?" Bert's freckled face was aglow as he said it.

"Frontier Day beats Fourth of July. We are going somewhere now!" Charlie said, pinching him. The two promptly got into a scuffle which lasted until their father and mother appeared and Mrs. Malley brought out the hot platter of chops and the coffee.

The sun was rising as they drove past the Lake on their way to Laramie, Mary was on the front seat with her uncle, Bert and Charlie on the back

seat with their mother. Just as the sky was getting golden streaks across the blue, Mr. Merwin turned around to speak to his wife, and she exclaimed, gazing at him with displeasure:

"For Mercy's sake, what shirt have you got on?"

He put his hand to his chest.

"A nice 'biled' shirt! Don't look so cross at me, mamma."

"Mary, why didn't you tell him before we started?"

"Tell him what, Auntie?" Mary's eyes were dancing with fun.

"You two! You two!" groaned Mrs. Merwin. "Well, we must turn around and go back to the house. Turn those horses around, Billy Merwin. You'll have to change! I won't go to Cheyenne with you with that ridiculous old ragged shirt on!"

"I'll bet a dollar you will!" Uncle Billy touched Dick and Dolly with the whip and they trotted faster than ever. Bert and Charlie laughed aloud. Mary's glance met her uncle's.

"Your shirt is n't so *very* ragged," she whispered. "You can change when we get to the hotel!"

"William Merwin!" said Aunt Kate.

"Katharine Merwin!" he replied solemnly, and clucked to the horses to go faster. The

children were all laughing. "I'm no dude, lady. Besides, you would lock me up on bread and water for a week if I let you miss the very first train. K-k-kh Dick. Get up Dolly.

Mary began to sing.

"Here goes the Raggedy Man! The Raggedy Man,
The Raggedy Man!

Here goes the Raggedy Man all the way to town!"

"Well, Miss Imperence, you're backing up your uncle in his iniquity," laughed Aunt Kate, humming the song that Uncle Billy and the boys were joining.

The spring wagon rolled rapidly away towards Laramie over the smooth road of the plain, the whole family singing merrily together:

"Here goes the Raggedy Man,
All the way to town!"

The excursion train for Frontier Day, with steam up, stood on the siding; people were crowding into the cars. Many of them carried picnic baskets, for but one day's stay; others, like the Merwin family, had hand baggage for three days at the State capital. Everybody was laughing and talking and jostling. Mary sat with her uncle in the second car. Aunt Kate and the boys opposite them. As soon as the train got under way, the Laramie band in the front car

struck up, "Everybody works but father;" and played while the train pulled up the long grade. They passed the monument to General Sherman at the highest point on the Union Pacific, and after a rollicking trip rolled down to the station at Cheyenne.

Fred met them at the station and carried Mary's hand-bag to the Inter-Ocean Hotel, where the family were to stay. Thousands of people had already arrived, from Denver and Nebraska, as well as from all over Wyoming. The town was in gala dress. Banners of red and yellow, the colors of the festival, flags and ribbons decorated the streets; shops and houses fluttered the bright colors. Cowboys in red and yellow shirts and wearing "shaps-chaparrejos,"—great woolly-leathern leggings,—with gray or white sombreros on their heads, galloped about the streets.

That night the mile high City of the Plains made carnival. Mary watched from the hotel window for awhile, then her uncle took her out into it all. Hundreds of young people and hundreds of children, wearing masks, blowing horns, and cracking whips, went gaily through the brightly lighted streets, pelting one another with confetti, till the sidewalks were covered with the multi-colored litter of bright paper. The moon came out; midnight struck, then the crowd

went off to sleep in all sorts of places from hotel rooms or friends' "spare beds," to wagon camps or store-counters or blankets under the stars.

Thousands more people poured into town next morning for the first day of the races on special trains from neighboring states, and local extras bringing the population of several hundred miles of the mountain west. Wagon loads of Shoshone Indians came and encamped to take their part in the show.

When two o'clock came on the first day of the races, and Mary cantered out on Fireball beside her Uncle Billy, fully twenty thousand people had assembled at Frontier Park.

The grand stand and the benches were crowded. Hundreds of wagons and buggies made points of vantage for many spectators. The tops of cars of the special trains that lined up across the mile-track were covered with men; boys by hundreds were perched on fences, horse sheds, and every possible place.

Mary's eyes were brighter than ever as dressed in her brown linen habit with a brown cap on her head, the red and yellow ribbons of the day fastened above her heart with a pin bearing the portrait of President Roosevelt, she rode past the grand stand with her uncle. She saw her aunt with Fred awaiting her turn to ride in the

ladies' race just as her Aunt Kate saw them too, and nodding lifted her gauntleted hand.

It was a cloudless August day. The sky was deep, deep blue, vivid and glowing. The great plain swept away on one side, yellow and shimmering in the sunshine. On the other the line of peaks over in Colorado bordered the blue sky with the grayish white of last winter's snow before the pure September snows begin.

"Look, oh, look, Uncle Billy!" cried Mary in great excitement, as at a turn of the way they came upon the encampment of Shoshone Indians. Their white tents were pitched among the cottonwood trees a stone's throw from the grand stand.

"Behold our Shoshones—Government guests at the show!" returned her uncle, reining in for Mary to watch for a few moments the copper-colored men, women, and children standing idly about among the cottonwoods. Most of them were in ceremonial paint and feathers, gorgeous in festival attire.

"Do you see your Ute friends?" asked Mr. Merwin. "All Injins look alike to me."

"No, but maybe they don't like these Shoshone women," said Mary.

"Perhaps not," assented her uncle. "I've known other women besides squaws who

would n't associate with each other. Come along, chick."

He rode forward and Mary followed.

"Look, Uncle Billy, look!" she cried again. "There's Bud Todd!"

They were riding into the enclosure, just beyond the high boards of the corral where the wild horses were penned, hidden from view. Bud was one of twelve men lining up to an official of the races to draw his number for the wild horse contest. When he had drawn it he walked over to speak to them. He showed Mary the bit of cardboard with his number. It was Number One.

"I've seen the prize," he said. "It's a saddle, best and handsomest saddle ever made in Cheyenne or Laramie. I've been feeling the need of a new saddle myself for some time!" he added drolly.

"I hope you get it, Bud," said Mary heartily. "Have you seen the horse you are to ride?"

"No, not yet, and I sha'n't see him till to-morrow when the wild horse race comes off. They've got 'em all shut up behind that high fence in the corral."

"Bucking and pitching to-day, eigh, Todd?" asked Mr. Merwin.

"That's the ticket," said Bud, and started off

to watch from the fence the first cow-pony race just called.

Fred Merwin rode in that race. Twenty boys and young men on their best ponies sped round the mile track when the word was given, but poor Mary, who had never been on horseback in a crowd before, did not see half of the race. Fireball, unused to so much commotion, danced nervously about. In her anxiety not to crush against the girl whose horse crowded hers on the other side, Mary was fussing with her skirt or her bridle half the time.

Fred made a good run for it, but came third on Nibs under the wire. Mary wondered how the people could cheer for anybody but Fred. Uncle Billy laughed.

"Don't look so sad, puss," he said. "Fred's only a kid. Plenty of time for him to win races yet. Hello! they're calling the race your aunt is in. Bring your mare down the enclosure a little way." He led and Mary followed to the end of the line of fifty on-lookers on horseback. Mary now had a free outlook across the field, and Fireball stood reasonably still.

In front of the Judges' stand, with all the brightly dressed people in the grand stand for a background, was Aunt Kate on Venus, manoeuvring for place at the start among five women and girls on thoroughbreds. Her com-

petitors were from four other Wyoming ranches. One, a girl with a pink shirt-waist, riding a white horse, was from far away as Cody, up by Yellowstone Park.

Mrs. Merwin's dark hair was braided and wound closely around her head. She wore a jaunty jockey's cap, old-gold in color. On the jacket of her short dark habit was a little rosette of red and yellow ribbon.

"Go!"

The word was given; the ladies' race began. Venus lagged behind the others at the start, then, at touch of her mistress's bridle, galloped forward at the first chance, got the inside track, and held it, third, for nearly half of the mile.

"I'm afraid Auntie is going to lose too," said Mary.

"Watch her!" was Uncle Billy's only answer as Venus, running now at her best pace, took second place. Aunt Kate touched her with her crop. A moment later Venus was abreast of the only rivals she and her rider feared in all Wyoming, the girl in the pink waist on the white horse who had held the lead for more than half of the mile. The other three were left further and further behind, Venus and the white horse ran neck and neck while their riders plied their whips and leaning forward, almost standing in their stirrups, raced madly towards the wire. The

crowd was cheering and calling the names of the horses and the colors of the riders.

Suddenly Fireball, on whose neck Mary in her excitement had dropped the bridle, darted forward and galloped straight across the grass towards her mother Venus, reaching the fence beside the Judges' stand as Venus shot under the wire. Mary's face was flaming as Aunt Kate waving her crop to her turned, rode back, and drew up in the track outside the fence.

"Nice of you to come over here, dear," she said.

"Fireball did it herself," stammered Mary. "I—I didn't dare try to stop her when she started. I felt so—conspicuous!"

"Nobody minded," said Aunt Kate, herself the centre of observation, and rode away to get her purse of gold as her husband galloped up to take charge of Mary. They rode round then to meet her, the victor, and she came with them to watch the wild steer roping, the bucking and pitching contests, and the rest of the day's events.

Next day as Fireball daintily picked her way through the crowd at Frontier Park, following Tom and Venus into the enclosure again, Mary saw Mrs. O'Brien. She had rolled her white shirt-waist sleeves above her elbows; streaks of green and yellow paint covered her arms. Her

collar was turned in; bands of green paint were around her neck on her dark skin. She was bare-headed. One long black braid was hanging down her back. The other was coiled on top of her head supporting a tuft of green feathers. Smiling she came over and stood beside Fireball as Mary reined in.

"How do you do by this time, Miss Lloyd?" she greeted her.

"I'm well, thank you," said Mary. "How is your mother?"

"Look at her over yonder. Her appearance speaks for itself."

Mary looked. Bird-of-the-Mountain stood at a little distance, silent and abstracted. She wore new beaded moccasins, green gaiters, a buckskin garment like a boy's bathing suit worked with green and yellow porcupine quills, and a wonderful headdress made of gay quills and beads and waving feathers. Her bare arms and legs were painted in fantastic colors. She paid no attention to Mary, but stood with her eyes fixed on her saddleless pony that she held by the bridle.

"Ma certainly is a peach, and no mistake," said Mrs. O'Brien. "She will win the Indian women's race all right. None of those Shoshone biddies over there will stand any show when my old girl gets up on her pony."

"Are you going to race too?"

"Yes, with my mother. Well, so long," said Mrs. O'Brien.

"Good-bye," called Mary, as Fireball hurried after Tom and Venus. On the fence at the opening where they turned into the enclosure sat a young man, half Indian, holding beside him on a post of the fence a solemn-faced brown youngster.

"Why, there's Patsy O'Brien!" exclaimed Mary.

Her aunt and uncle turned to look.

"His dad has to play nursemaid while his women folks race cow-ponies," said her uncle. "Well, Wyoming is a great place for women's rights!"

"I do hope he won't let that poor little child fall!" said Mrs. Merwin anxiously.

"Don't you worry, Kate," said her husband. "Patsy would sit still on that post if his dad went off and left him. Papposes are not nervous."

The cheering began. The race was on. Bird-of-the-Mountain mounted on her pony and her rivals on theirs were lining up in front of the Judges' stand. The man with the megaphone announced the first event, the Indian women's cow-pony race.

"Go!"

Round the mile track like a flame of color flashed the ten women and girls on horseback, without saddles, riding as their ancestresses rode before ever the paleface came, while twenty thousand people cheered again and again. It was all a rushing mass of color and motion for three quarters of a mile. Then in the last quarter, Bird-of-the-Mountain, her daughter, and one of the Shoshone women came out of the crowd neck and neck, whipping their ponies towards the goal. At the last moment, the old Ute squaw shot half a neck ahead and dashed under the wire. She had won! She halted her pony instantly, and sat very still in stolid dignity till a man from the Judges' stand brought her money, then she and her daughter disappeared.

There was another wild steer roping contest on this second day. Bud Todd who lost in yesterday's roping won to-day. He came to speak to the family from Red Top not five minutes before the crowning event of the three days' show was called,—the wild horse race.

Twelve wild horses that no man had ever mounted were ready in the big corral. One by one, according to number, they would be released.

"The cowboy who first saddles and rides his wild horse is the one who wins in this contest," Mrs. Merwin explained to Mary. "Bud may have all the help he needs from Jim and Don-

nelly to rope and bridle his horse, but he must saddle and mount without help when the word is given. The man who saddles and stays on even two minutes wins."

The contest was called. The corral gate was opened.

"Number One!" shouted the man at the gate.

"Number One!" responded Bud Todd, riding slowly up on Nibs, his long noosed rope ready in his hand.

"Number One!" shouted a man in the crowd near the gate.

It was the Elks' Secretary.

At that moment out into the enclosure bounded wild horse Number One. With a vicious snort he was off across the grass like the wind.

It was the little buckskin broncho!

Bud galloped after him, swinging his rope.

"Oh, oh, what a terrible thing to happen! Bud can't ride that pony!" said Mary.

Her Aunt Kate was laughing.

Uncle Billy's face wore a blank expression, as if he had seen nothing at all. He knew very well that the Elks' Secretary and the man at the gate were watching him, to see how he would take this practical joke. Whoever might be concerned in this turning of the tables on Bud Todd, would also be watching the master of Red Top Ranch.

When Mr. Merwin spoke, it was in a low tone.

"Don't look so distressed, ducky," he commanded Mary. "Pretend you never laid eyes on that bronk before. You may be sure Bud won't back out. He knows when the joke is on him. He'll get even, all right!"

Bud Todd did not back out. He galloped furiously after that buckskin, his jaw set, his rope flying.

"What does it all mean? How did he happen to draw the buckskin," asked Mary.

"Hush! More than the big prize saddle is at stake for Bud," whispered Aunt Kate, leaning from her saddle and pretending to arrange Mary's necktie. "All Wyoming will know by tomorrow's newspapers that Bud Todd sent an outlaw that he couldn't ride as a gift saddle-horse to the Elk's Fair. Everybody will know, too, that they have managed it so that Bud would draw that particular horse to ride at Frontier Day."

"Gee whiz!" cried Uncle Billy, suddenly seizing Fireball's bridle. "Here comes that bronk. We must all scatter!"

The outlaw bore down upon the line of on-lookers. He came tearing among them like a mowing-machine on the red top grass in a mountain meadow. Fifty riders scattered in every

direction. Mary found herself back of the post where Patsy O'Brien sat beside his father. Ponies and thoroughbreds rushed out of the way of the little buckskin like mad, while his three pursuers came after. He wheeled and was away towards the grand stand, splintering the fence like kindling wood before him. When he was headed away from that crowded quarter, he rushed wildly round the track, the three cowboys full gallop at his heels. The broncho had passed the place where Patsy O'Brien and his father were perched on the fence, when he suddenly wheeled and dashed through the fence. The child's father, alarmed, sprang to the ground; the child remained for an instant on the post. In another he would have been under the feet of the brute, but in that instant, Bud Todd swooped forward and not pausing in his gallop, grasped the little Indian by the back of his clothes, and with one arm around the child rode on in unchecked pursuit.

The crowd stood up and cheered. Bud seemed to realize then for the first that he could not hope to rope the wild horse with a baby in his arms. He smiled and waved his sombrero in response, as Jim and Donnelly headed the buckskin round. The horse was charging towards him. Mary Lloyd chanced to be nearest him of anybody. Bud dashed by her and placed the child on Fire-

ball in front of her with one swing of his arm and was gone.

Mary laughed aloud, and held Patsy close. The twenty thousand people cheered like mad—cheered and cheered and cheered!

Another minute and Bud had roped the outlaw. Jim and Donnelly galloped to his aid. Soon the horse was tied in ropes as if he were done up in a hammock, and was hauled somewhere near the Judges' stand where he was held, while eleven other wild horses, young horses just out of the herd, not creatures of evil reputation like himself, were let out of the corral, caught and brought up to the point of departure.

The moment came. Twelve big saddles lay sprawled on the ground beside the twelve horses; twelve cowboys with keen eyes and set jaws heard the word:

“Go!”

The assistant cowboys helped loosen the bridled heads. Then the contestants grasped the bits; they saddled and cinched; they strove to mount. For ten minutes the space where they were was one wild, writhing, seething, blur; one mass of horses and men. The crowd held its breath and looked. Not one man of eleven could get up on his beast.

Suddenly out in front of them all, on the mile track, his sombrero on his head, a look of serenity



Bud placed the Indian baby in Mary's arms

on his face, rode Bud Todd astride the little buckskin broncho. One foot was in the stirrup on one side of the horse, and one foot in the stirrup on the other side. The outlaw arose; he seemed to stand up on the hairs of his tail. Bud struggled and beat him. He descended and put his nose to the ground. He rose again. He humped his back like a camel over and over again. He pitched like a little yacht in a choppy sea. His master sat firm. He whirled round and round. He bucked and bucked and bucked. He balked,—then he bolted!

This was easy at last for Bud Todd. He lifted his sombrero to the cheering crowd, and the crowd went wild with applause as he rode placidly off around the mile track.

The outlaw was conquered at last.

Bud brought him up to the wire on an easy gallop, jumped off, and stood modestly awaiting his award while still his eleven competitors were struggling to saddle and ride.

He was called to the Judges' stand and received his prize saddle before the multitude with a face unmoved, solemn as usual. Then he left the buckskin with Jim and Donnelly and came on foot to find the family from Red Top Ranch.

"Good for you, Todd!" Mr. Merwin greeted him.

Bud nodded his thanks.

"Do you mind letting Miss Mary bring the Injun kid down to where the buckskin is?" he inquired.

Mr. Merwin hesitated a minute. Then he understood and laughed aloud.

"All right, all right!" he consented. "Go with Bud to your pet bronk, Mary. See your friend through!"

Mary wonderingly obeyed. Fireball daintily made her way down the track. Bud disappeared for a moment and came back from one of the peanut stands with a paper of pink striped candy which he handed to Mary.

"Can't you and the kid feed some sugar candy to that bronk as a reward of merit?" he asked.

"Yes, of course!" said Mary heartily. "He deserves it!" She guided Fireball up to the outlaw, where Jim and Donnelly were standing by his head and heels, and there before all Wyoming she gave him sugar candy and he ate from her hand.

Bud Todd went back to the Judges' stand and spoke to the man with the megaphone. He smiled, hesitated; he consulted one or two of the officials about him, and received an amused consent.

Then he lifted up his megaphone and shouted:

"Mr. Bud Todd, champion of Wyoming, has presented the wild horse that he has to-day tamed

before you as a charitable offering to the Elks for the next fair. The horse will be sold as a children's pet. Sugar candy subscriptions thankfully received."

Then twenty thousand people laughed and cheered till the mountain echoes rang.

CHAPTER XIV

IN AN INDIAN CAMP

MARY found an envelope, addressed to herself, lying on her uncle's desk when they returned to the ranch next day. It contained a letter from her father, one from her mother, and one from her sister Edith, all saying how glad they should be to see her when she got home next week.

"Next week!" Mary looked up with surprise. "It does n't seem possible that it is almost time for school to begin. Mother says it's a week from Monday. It will be nice to see them again, but I wish ——" she stopped, caught by the odd look on her uncle's face as he read a telegram that was with his letters. "What is it, Uncle Billy?" she asked.

"Never mind," he replied, turning over the paper.

"Well, here's something to mind!" cried Aunt Kate from her rocking-chair and letters. "Here's Mary's mother inviting me to bring Mary home myself. She says it is high time I

came East not only to visit her, but to go shopping in New York now we are getting rich."

"Well, we're not as rich as we're going to be—maybe," said Uncle Billy with a queer thrill in his voice. "Look at this, Kitty." He rose and handed the telegram to his wife. She took it, read it in a glance, then sat gazing at the yellow paper with a serious face. By and by she came and perched on the arm of her husband's chair.

"Well, little woman?"

"If you had known while we were in Cheyenne you could have gone right on up to the Big Horn country," she said, trying to speak cheerfully. Then suddenly, as his arm went round her, she put her head down on his shoulder and sobbed. Uncle Billy sighed. Mary sat very still, looking at her own letter, trembling with sympathy. After awhile her aunt lifted her head. She smiled sweetly at Mary as she saw the look of love on the little girl's face.

"We can't spare you to go home yet, Mary," said her uncle, smoothing her aunt's hair. "I'll have to be away from home a good deal this fall. We'll telephone in to Laramie and get a telegram sent your father and mother asking them to lend you to us till——"

"Let's say till after Thanksgiving," put in Aunt Kate eagerly. "I'll write to them, too." She rose, went across and took Mary's upturned

face between her hands. "Dearie," she said, "our telegram is about some mining property we own up in the Big Horn country. It says they have struck it rich in the—the 'Little Nelly Mine.' We named one claim for each of the children, and now ——"

"I'll love to stay with you," said Mary. "Uncle Billy, may I write the telegram to send home myself?"

"Yes, puss. What do you want to say?" He took up a bit of paper and a pencil.

Mary silently counted on her fingers for a moment.

"Ten words?" she asked.

"Yes, ten at least," he answered. "I guess we can even afford you one or two extra words if you want them."

"No, I can get it all into ten. Listen! 'Dear Family: Unavoidably detained Wyoming until after Thanksgiving. See letter.'"

Uncle Billy smiled. "That's all right, chick. Now go and write your letter, while I start this over the wires. I'll add a 'please' on my own account." He patted her head and went out to the telephone.

Aunt Kate turned to Mary and held out her arms and Mary rushed into them.

"Darling, I am so glad you want to stay," she said. "I could n't bear to be alone while your

uncle is up at the mine. We named this mine for our baby when she was only a month old. You are such a comfort, dearie!"

"I'm so glad," said Mary, with a little hug. "Let's write our letters now, will you, Auntie, both together?"

"Yes, indeed."

Before the letters were finished they stopped and made a plan which they described in their letters. This plan was carried out during all the bright weeks of autumn while Uncle Billy was away buying machinery for the mine, and superintending its being put in place. There was opened at Red Top, as soon as consent came for Mary to stay, what Bert and Charlie called "The Mary Lloyd School of One Scholar." Mrs. Merwin taught Mary regular lessons for two hours every afternoon. Bert and Charlie who now went to school at a log schoolhouse down the river, professed scorn of the school at home, until Fred told them one day at dinner that he had decided to fit for Laramie University with his mother, instead of going to town to school as he did last winter.

Bert passed his plate to his mother for more pudding, shaking the plate high in the air.

"Mamma, when Fred gets through with the University are you going to teach him enough to go East to college?" he asked.

Mrs. Merwin smiled more gaily than she had since her husband went away. "Put down your plate, Bert," she said. "Perhaps if I study hard myself I'll learn how to teach you to ask for pudding. What would your father say to you!"

It was late in October when a letter came from Mr. Merwin asking his wife to bring Mary and come at once to meet him at Powder River, a small town about half way between his mining camp and the nearest railroad station. Mrs. Merwin read this letter aloud at the supper-table.

"I shall come down from the hills and shall be at Powder River on Saturday, October 27th, if all goes well," he wrote. "A man from Chicago is due to meet me there on that day. I expect him to be my partner in developing the mine after I have shown it to him. I want you both to see it, and I'll get a wagon and take you to the mine. We'll meet at Powder River at the best hotel in town. Tell Mary it's a smaller hotel than the Waldorf-Astoria, so I'll have no trouble in finding you. You can take the stage for Powder River when you get off the train. I leave it to you, Kate—you're a good traveller—to get time-tables and learn the best connections. But I hope you will start at once, so as to be sure to be at Powder River by the twenty-seventh. In haste to catch the mail. Love to all."

"Partial pa!" said Bert.

"I call that favoritism," said Charlie.

Mrs. Merwin sat looking at Mary's eager, glowing face, and silently poured for herself a cup of tea.

"Why did n't partial dad send for one of his own good boys?" demanded Bert.

"I ought to go along and take care of you, Mother," said Fred.

"Are you really going, Auntie?" asked Mary, in a voice that trembled with excitement.

"Yes, dear, I suppose we'll have to go," said Mrs. Merwin.

"First class in geography! The Mary Lloyd School! Where is Powder River?" asked Charlie.

"Run and get the atlas and I'll show you," laughed Mary. When Charlie brought it from the sitting-room she opened it on the dining-room table and found the place where she was to meet her uncle. She borrowed Fred's red pencil and marked it with a big red B for Billy.

Two days later, after a long journey on the train, with two changes, Mary and her aunt found themselves towards sunset on Friday the only passengers left on the stage bound for Powder River. It was an old-fashioned mountain stage-coach, drawn by four horses. As they swung along the high, lonely road, the driver sat

up on the seat in front, cracked his whip, and sang a song with a cheerful refrain that Mary felt like joining, only she was tired and sleepy; so instead she put her head down on her Aunt Kate's lap and went to sleep. Mrs. Merwin was wishing as darkness came that she had staid in the railroad town until next morning and hired a livery team to drive out to the river station. This long, chilly ride which would last well into the night, was scarcely the thing for Mary. Of course, it was as safe as staying at home —.

Suddenly the stage stopped with a jerk. Mary sat up sleepily. They heard horsemen and the sound of voices and of pistols firing. Mary rubbed her eyes, wondering if she were dreaming. She leaned forward towards the window and saw a broad-faced, ugly old Indian with war-paint on his face and neck, war-paint on his buckskin shirt, and draggled feathers hanging from his old hat.

"How do you do?" said Mary pleasantly. "Do you speak English?"

Mrs. Merwin recognized the face and fell back with a faint cry.

"It's that horrid old Ute medicine man who used to be up in our hills," she said.

"I asked you do you speak English? What is your name?" persisted Mary.

"Ugh!" grunted the old Indian. "Me Moonshine. Heap bad Indian."

"Oh, you speak English then?" said Mary. "Well, if you are a Ute, you must be some relation to Mrs. O'Brien and little Patsy and Mrs. Bird-of-the-Mountain."

The Indian's black eyes looked at her with a piercing glance. He leaned into the coach, with a quick motion, as if he were about to seize her, then jumped back and was gone in the darkness of the night. The face of the driver appeared at the other side. He opened the coach door.

"I am sorry for this disturbance, ma'am," he said.

"What does it all mean?" cried Mrs. Merwin. "My husband supposed we would be safe in your coach ——"

"You are, you are, ma'am! It's only some fool young men a-horseback. I guess they got the notion I'd have your husband's Chicago man aboard to-night, so they were going to shoot up the coach and try to scare him for a little fun."

"Fun!" exclaimed Mrs. Merwin and Mary in a breath.

At that moment the driver was hurled in head first by strong arms outside; the door was slammed shut and the coach started briskly off, the horses going at a great pace.

"Oh, oh, are you hurt?" cried Mary.

"No." The man sat up, looking dazed. He slowly got into the seat opposite Mrs. Merwin and Mary, while faster went the horses and the coach lurched and swung along the road mile after mile.

"I am afraid you are hurt," said Mrs. Merwin at last, as he put his hand to his head.

"It kind of bumped me," he said. "I can't make it out. I thought the boys all rode off as soon as they saw I had only a lady and a little girl aboard."

"It must be Moonshine," said Mary. "Why don't you lean from the window, and demand his surrender?"

The man smiled. "That'd be the story-book way, miss," he said. "But I have n't got my gun." After a time he added: "It's up there on top."

"You ought to be there," cried Mary indignantly, "instead of that horrid old Ute Indian."

"Indian!" Alert and anxious now, the driver opened the window, leaned out, and looked forward. He drew his head in again instantly. "He is an Indian, all right," he said soberly. He must have been with those boys. He's probably taking us into camp. There's a band of several hundred Utes camped off down Powder River. They're on the war-path, too."

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Merwin. "It is six-

teen years since there have been any Indians on the war-path in Wyoming."

"These are out in their paint, all right. They are Utes, come from out White Rock way. Uncle Sam's soldiers are after them too. I don't want to scare you, but ——"

The coach lurched, rose upward, then sideways like a steamboat rolling in a heavy sea; suddenly it stopped, leaning sideways, and remained still.

"Wheel 's off," said the driver, and flung open the upper door. He crawled out and went forward to the horses. Mrs. Merwin and Mary, huddled within, could hear his voice loud and angry, but no reply came. Mary peered out. She saw the Ute medicine-man, standing close-by, silent, with folded arms. At a little distance the light of a camp-fire shone before a large encampment of Indian tepees.

"See, Auntie!" Mary whispered, "Moonshine has brought us to a camp."

Mrs. Merwin was not very much afraid; she had lived all her life in Wyoming, but she was a little frightened, and more for Mary than for herself.

"Keep quiet, dear," she whispered. "The driver will do his best to take care of us."

"There are some more Indians coming," whispered Mary. "He can't get this coach up straight unless they help him."

The new arrivals seemed not at all inclined to help the driver who struggled in vain to right the overturned vehicle. There were six or eight Indians, and they lined up beside Moonshine and waited for him to act. After several minutes he walked across and looked into the coach.

"Come!" he commanded.

Mary could feel her heart beating wildly; her throat choked; she clung fast to the arm of her aunt, who paid no attention whatever to the old man. He waited, then repeated his command, but again had no answer. Shaking his head, he turned and said something to the Indians in line; they came forward and grouped about the coach. Those dark, stern faces promised nothing of safety. They were all old men, older even than the medicine-man, and they shook their heads stolidly when the driver asked them to help him get the coach up into place.

Moment after moment dragged by, while through Mary's mind went torturing memories of stories of scalping and burning by Indians of the wilds. The light of a lantern's gleam, the sudden swinging of the lantern itself above her head, made her spring up screaming aloud with terror.

"Don't, Mary, please don't!" begged her Aunt Kate.

"Who is there?" asked a voice behind the lantern.

"We are," said Mrs. Merwin. "How do you do?"

"For mercy's sake, it's the folks from Red Top Ranch!" returned the voice, and Mary saw through the mist of her fright the face of Mrs. O'Brien. The young woman said something rapidly in their own language to the Indians, and they drew away a little. Then she held out her hand. "Do climb out!" she said. "Let me help you!"

Mrs. Merwin and Mary were soon on the ground beside her.

"What made Mr. Moonshine bring us here?" asked Mary.

"He's looney, poor old fellow. He came into camp and told me that he run you up here because you mentioned my mother and me to him. He was off on a round-up with some of the young men."

"Are you on the war-path, too?" gasped Mary, looking up into Mrs. O'Brien's face.

"Not a bit of it," she answered, with a smile. "I'm just here with my mother, visiting her relations. The old lady is on the war-path herself, so is Moonshine. The rest of the Utes are on their way to spend the winter with the Sioux, where there is food to eat. It is too slim pickings out at White Rock this fall for them. I'm sorry you had such a scare, both of you. Come,

Mrs. Merwin, we'll go over to my tent, and I'll see if I can fix you up for the night. You better feed your team," she spoke to the driver. "Old Uncle Moony has smashed your wheel for you. You can't get it any farther to-night."

"I can get myself farther though," answered the man. He came and spoke to Mrs. Merwin. "The wheel is off sure and that puts the coach out, but if you and the little girl will get up on one of the horses, I can lead you to the Powder River ——"

"Thank you, but ——" Mrs. Merwin looked doubtfully from him to Mrs. O'Brien.

"It can't be done. Not to-night," she said. "You see our Ute boys are out to-night rounding up a provision wagon from Uncle Sam's soldiers, just to advertise to Government how hungry White Rock made them. You might run into them. It won't do to let lady folks go out of camp to-night. Your driver can ride on, if he wants to." She turned to Mary. "Come and see the nice tent I'll put you in," she said. "I'll take Patsy into my mother's tepee. Come along, you're my prisoners of war." She led the way towards the camp-fire. Mrs. Merwin and Mary, with their hand-bags in their hands, followed, Mary hurrying along beside her aunt feeling almost as if she were in a dream. As they passed the camp-fire they saw Moonshine

squatted on the ground silently puffing his pipe. Bird-of-the-Mountain stood at the entrance of her tepee. When she saw who was with her daughter, she turned and disappeared inside.

"My mother is crosser than ever at white folks these days," said Mrs. O'Brien. "I shall not be sorry to leave her and go home next week."

"You are going home next week, then?" asked Mrs. Merwin.

"Yes, my husband telephoned by long distance from Laramie the other day that if I did n't hurry home soon, I'd find him gone."

"Oh, have you a telephone here?" cried Mary. "We can call up uncle and ——"

"Not here. No, we're not quite so stylish as that. I was in town getting some things for the baby, and I called up Laramie to speak to my husband. Here you are!" She stopped before a little tent, pushed back the flap, and entered with her lantern. "Come in."

It was a pleasant, clean interior, the white canvas walls enclosing a wide camp cot bed and a tiny camp stove which shut out the chill of night with radiant heat. In a small skin hammock slept Patsy. Mary peeped at him admiringly. His mother put down the lantern and unfastened the thongs that held the hammock in place.

"I'll take him and sling him up in my mother's tepee for to-night," she said. "And I'll bring

you something to eat. How will breakfast food and canned milk do? I can get that for you good and hot in about five minutes. You must be hungry." She stood in the entrance of the tent, smiling hospitably.

"Thank you, hot porridge would be just the thing," said Mrs. Merwin, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"Lots of it, please," laughed Mary. "If it's cooked thin, I believe I could drink a quart!"

The young woman disappeared. Mary picked up the lantern from the ground and put it on Mrs. O'Brien's little trunk, which was placed on boughs above the dampness of the ground.

"Ought we to be afraid," Auntie?" she asked seriously.

Mrs. Merwin smiled. "No, dear, I am sure there's nothing to be afraid of, but your uncle will be worried about us when the driver gets to the hotel and tells him where he left us."

"I do wish they had a telephone here." Mary sat down beside her aunt. "Then we could call him up and tell him we are all right."

It was not long before they had eaten heartily of the cereal and milk brought them, and were warm and cosy side by side in the camp bed. Mary soon fell fast asleep in her Aunt Kate's arms, but Mrs. Merwin lay wide awake for

hours. At last she, too, fell asleep and knew no more until dawn.

"Well, is this the way you two girls meet me at Powder River?" cried a familiar voice, awakening both of the sleepers.

"Oh, Uncle Billy!" cried Mary, jumping out of bed. "The Indians captured us and ——"

He laughed aloud as he came into the tent.

"Well, you've got pretty good quarters here, for captives. I hope you were n't too much worried, Kate?"

"No, but I'm glad you've come." She sat up and kissed him.

"I can't make much fuss about their bringing you here, though I should like to; for we are all in a hurry to get these Utes out of this country and over into Dakota with the Sioux. They're ten miles off the stage road, and I did n't know that they were within hundreds of miles when I sent for you."

"Are n't you afraid they will capture you and torture you, Uncle Billy?" asked Mary anxiously.

"No, my dear. In the first place there's nobody around but a few old half-sick bucks and that medicine-man who ran you in. The younger ones are all out of camp, for some reason."

"They have gone to round up Uncle Sam's

soldiers' provision wagon," said Mary, and told him what Mrs. O'Brien had said. He heard with much interest.

"That explains a lot that we didn't understand," he said. "They are working good politics for Indian rights. But, come; it's a good thing you two slept in your clothes; we can start at once. I've got a top buggy and a pair of horses outside. We'll be at the hotel for breakfast, inside of two hours. Your stage driver got in about three o'clock this morning on one of his horses and made me ready to get out and scalp the whole Ute nation and him thrown in."

"I think we have had a grand adventure," said Mary, putting on her hat. "Won't the girls at home be excited when I tell them I was captured by the Indians."

"Well, run and say good-bye to Mrs. O'Brien," smiled Uncle Billy, "and we'll get out of this adventure just as fast as we can."

Good-byes were quickly said, and Mary, tucked between her uncle and aunt in the buggy, was soon rolling away towards their place of destination.

As they came to the top of a rise of ground, they saw riding towards them a band of Indians in war-paint and feathers. They were bringing into camp a large Government wagon, drawn by

some of their own horses. As they came nearer, a number of the younger Indians galloped forward as if to inspect them. Mr. Merwin stood up in the buggy, waved his whip, lifted his hat and waved it high in air, calling aloud in the way he often summoned his boys to dinner at Red Top Ranch. One of the young Indians signalled to the others to wait, then rode forward alone to meet the buggy as it was stopped by its driver. Mary's heart was beating like a bird's, and she could scarcely breathe. Her uncle sat down and put his arm around her.

"Don't be frightened, darling," said her aunt. "We know this young man. He is educated; he is a graduate."

The Indian came forward and saluted. "How do you do, Mr. Merwin," he called, in excellent English. "I am glad to see you."

"I'm glad to see you too, but I'd like to see you in better business than this!" returned Mr. Merwin.

"Well, we have to do something to advertise and get the Department to pay attention to our people's needs," said the Ute.

"Good-bye. These ladies are hungry," said Mr. Merwin, and speaking to his horses lifted his whip.

The young leader saluted, rode back, and gave an order to his men. They parted in ranks and

the buggy went rapidly onward through a lane of painted horsemen, sitting solemn on either side. A few moments later, and the band was out of sight, galloping down the hills on their way towards their encampment.

CHAPTER XV

HOME AGAIN

THEY were all back at Red Top Ranch after the visit to the mine. Thanksgiving Day had come and gone, and Mary was packing her trunk for the return to New Rochelle. It had been decided that her Aunt Kate was to take her home and make a short visit in the East and see New York for the first time. To-morrow they would be going to Laramie to take the train for Chicago. Mary was trying to be useful and get her things in order, but she kept running out of doors to see Uncle Billy, to feed the bottle-colt, to see what Bud Todd was doing, to say good-bye to dogs, or calves, or chickens, or to have a little visit with Fireball.

The pretty mare seemed to know that her friend was going away and nozzled against Mary who talked to her of their happy days together.

It was just before sunset that Mary went out for one more good-bye to Fireball, and found her tied to a post of the front porch. Mary's saddle and bridle were on her and a new crop was

tied with a broad red ribbon to the saddle. By another ribbon a large envelope was suspended from the mare's neck, addressed in hand-printed letters:—

MISS MARY LLOYD,
RED TOP RANCH

Mary stood and stared for a minute, then fairly trembling with excitement, she took the envelope, opened it and read these words:

Red Top Ranch, November, 1906.

“DEAR MARY:

“Enclosed please find legal deed of gift from my former owners, Kate and William Merwin. Bud Todd is to go to New York and take care of me on the train. This is to let you know that I am,

“Yours till death,
“FIREBALL.”

Mary stood with the papers in her hand and gazed at the beautiful animal. Fireball whinnied as if asking what it all meant. Mary felt big tears of joy stealing down her face. At first she could not move, but stood spell-bound, for it seemed too good to be true. She heard a sound of scuffling and Bert and Charlie pulled each

other into view around the corner of the house where they had been peeping to see how she took this great surprise. Aunt Kate came out in the porch then, sat down in a rocking-chair and pretended to sew. Mary walked slowly to the porch, dropped down on the bottom step and leaned her head against her aunt's knee.

"Oh, Aunt Kate, is it true? Is it true?" she managed to say.

"Yes, dear." Her aunt smoothed the bright, fluffy hair. "Yes, I wrote and asked your father and mother if they minded if I gave you Fireball and they are willing. Your uncle made up his mind to give you a horse and I knew that none of the others would please you."

"Oh, I—I wanted her so," gasped Mary. She took her aunt's hand and cuddled her cheek in the palm. "I wanted her so, but I did n't dare say so!" she said. "Mother wrote me not to ask to buy her, because she was sure you could not spare her."

"I have Venus," said Aunt Kate contentedly. "Besides, I am going to New York."

"Won't it be fun to travel together," said Mary.

Just then she saw her uncle coming on Nibs from an errand and she sprang up, loosed Fireball's halter, jumped on her back, and was away like the wind to meet him.

"Uncle Billy, I don't even know how to begin to thank you and auntie," she called joyously as she wheeled and rode at his side.

"Well, as long as you saved my wife's life when she was captured by the Indians she has a right to give you her trick mare if she wants to," he answered, with his funniest smile.

"You dear, lovely man!" said Mary, gazing at him with affection.

"You dear, lovely girl!" he returned, laughing. "Our secret has panned out all right, has n't it, honey? I sent for you to cheer Aunt Kate up, and she seemed more pleased at the idea of your owning Fireball than with anything this whole year."

"I'm glad," said Mary. "Oh, Uncle Billy, I do hate to go and leave you!"

"I hate to spare you," he said. "But never you mind, sweetheart. There are other summers coming. You and Uncle Billy will never go back on each other."

"Never!" said Mary.

When Mr. Merwin and the boys saw their mother and Mary off on the train at Laramie, Charlie broke down and cried. Fred and Bert made fun of him, but Charlie did not care. He sniffed and wiped his eyes before all the people in the sleeping-car when he kissed his mother good-bye. Then he rushed out of the train.



“Oh! Auntie, is it true?”

Mr. Merwin and the other boys stood in the aisle talking with Mrs. Merwin and Mary until the train began to move. Then they hurried out, and stood on the platform.

Mary could see her uncle standing there waving his big, soft hat, the mountain breeze blowing on his face, until the train moved away from the station.

Then she leaned back with quivering lips and a brave effort to smile.

"You don't want to go home yet, do you?" said her aunt.

"It will be all right to be at home again," answered Mary. "But, oh, how I do hate to leave Uncle Billy!"

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